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Tom Clancy's
GHOST RECON
ADVANCED WARFIGHTER
IN STORES MARCH 2007
UBISOFT

Art by: **LeSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

What's in a number?

I'm going to touch on a touchy subject, but one that's been festering in this industry for far too long: game scores. Take this scenario for instance. I am a 15-year platforming fan and specialist and I've played them all, NES to next-gen, and so I write a thousand or so glowing words on why Psychonauts will surely please each and every fellow platforming fan that picks it up. I've said why and clearly stated my intentions of addressing the platforming segment of gamers. Why now must I apply a number? To me, and people like me, surely it's a high-scoring game, but to the guy who lives for first-person army games and despises cartoon characters, the game is not even on his radar. If it is, it's likely a 5… *to him.* This is why we assign games per specialty. Take Medal of Honor for instance: It's a 3 to me but I can clearly see why it's a 9 to a fan of plugging krauts or whatever war you choose to enter. But I wouldn't be writing MoH, now would I? No, I'd be off freaking out over Kameo while Brady did that. And so, what is in a score? We oftentimes feel like the 20-50-plus hours to play a game followed by the many hours to write it are squandered once we apply the number. And who are we to place a number on such subjective ground? We can tell you across the boards when a game fails technically so you don't need a low number to tell you that, just a sound review, and even then if you love a given franchise you're probably going to buy it anyway and find a silver lining.

Everybody is so hung up on numbers and grades in this country. The same applies for films. What do I care if some middle-aged Dockers man that thought *Sideways* was the film event of a lifetime hates *Arthur and the Invisibles*? I love animation and design and loved *Arthur*. But unfortunately most film reviewers do not share my tastes, hence *Wallace and Gromit* beating out *Howl's Moving Castle* for the Oscar. That said, that same middle-aged man in his Dockers may think me an infantile fool, and he has every right. Men like him can read him, guys like me can read me and so on. The thing is that I've made the study and playing of video games my life and sometimes putting a score at the end takes the wind out of my sails, just as much as when I see where another editor who clearly shouldn't be reviewing a certain game gets it dead wrong. Why should the developers and publishers have to pay for these mistakes? We all know the damage a low score or bad review, no matter how qualified (or not) the reviewer, can do. So, what if we just…wrote. As usual your comments are both welcome and needed.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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Blood and Gore
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Jump in.

XBOX 360™

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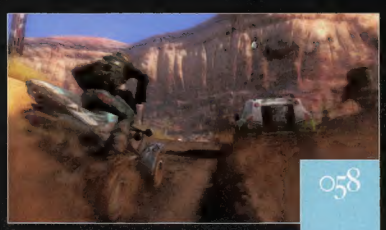
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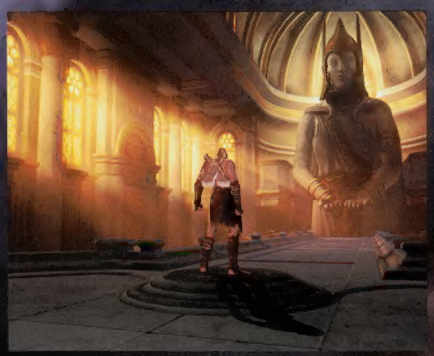

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PlayStation 2
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Konami rolls out its 2007 models

East meets West as Konami prepares for another banner year

At an event held February 1, Konami announced several new titles for 2007 along with release date details on a handful of previously announced titles. The biggest surprise among the well-rounded and surprisingly handheld-based lineup was Castlevania: Dracula X Chronicles (see page 74) a polygonal redux of the legendary PC Engine CD Castlevania that includes unlockable versions of the original Rondo of Blood (Dracula X--thus ending its $200 run on ebay) and a special PSP version of Symphony of the Night.

Other newly announced titles included GoPets, a virtual pet game aimed at kid; Deweys Adventure, a nice looking PSP action game starring a piece of Dew (also aimed at kids); Honeycomb, a puzzle/music game for the NDS from Hudson; Time Ace, a 3D aerial shooting game with a sci-fi bend; Wing Island, the first flight action game for the Wii (also from Hudson); Koroinpa, an action puzzle game for Wii that lets players tilt and rotate the Wii Remote to roll a ball around a maze; Konami Classics Arcade Hits, a compilation of 80s arcade hits (including Contra, Gradius, Rush 'N Attack; and others, including yet more DDR and a sequel to Lost in Blue, aptly named Lost in Blue 2.

The standout was definitely Hellboy for 360 from our friends at Krome Studios. Backbone Entertainments Brooktown High--the first dating sim for PSP--also looks great, as does their long awaited NDS Death Jr. game: Science Fair of Doom (we were worried about this one but it may just surprise you). Coded Arms Contagion looks like another solid PSP FPS, although there was no sign of its PS3 daddy.

Hellboy

Brooktown High

Coded Arms: Contagion

Dewey's Adventure

Koroinpa

Death Jr. Science Fair of Doom

Castlevania: Dracula X

Go Pet

Time Ace

Wing Island

Honeycomb

Konami Arcade Classics

Your struggle is timeless. Your enemy is immortal....

With an incredibly deep story, lush environments, PC-enhanced gameplay, and new characters, fighting styles, weapons, and items, the Jade Empire experience has never been more compelling. In this spectacular action-RPG Special Edition, your choices and actions will determine the fate of the entire Jade Empire.

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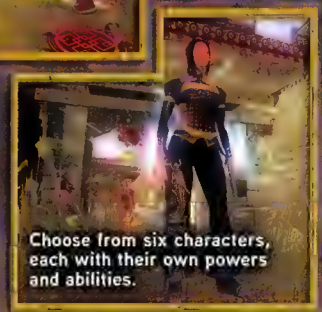
Choose from six characters, each with their own powers and abilities.

MATURE 17+ M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Mild Language
Suggestive Themes

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

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2K

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There's a new developer in town...

GAMECOCK MEDIA GROUP

Oddly named but exciting publisher

"Two of the most successful entrepreneurs in the history of game publishing are at it again... and their timing couldn't be better" is how the release reads. Indeed the pairing of former Gathering of Developers CEO Mike Wilson and president Harry Miller is cause for celebration. If anybody knows the ins-and-outs of running a games studio, it's these guys.

Dedicated to bringing creativity and a sense of humor back to the business—obviously, with a name like Gamecock—brings a "well-funded, independent, artist-driven game company to the bloated and originality-starved industry."

Here's where it gets really good... "Taking its lead from the downturn of big Hollywood and the rise of the independent film movement, Gamecock will embrace the indie model and favor the most innovative and original game developers. The company will be relationship-driven, offering its developers a high-degree of participation and the freedom and financial incentives to perform to their utmost abilities." Bravo. Have we not been hoping for such a publisher to arise? Maybe next-gen 2D isn't such a pipe dream after all...although I don't see any just yet. Time to pitch away!

Mushroom Men: Next-Gen Console and Handheld

Fury: PC

Insecticide: Handheld and PC

Hero: Next-Gen Console

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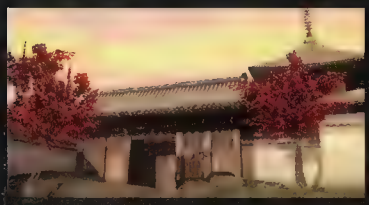

EVERYONE 10+
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10+
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Alcohol and Tobacco Reference
Fantasy Violence
Mild Language
Mild Suggestive Themes

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Blood
Crude Humor
Mild Language
Mild Suggestive Themes
Use of Alcohol and Tobacco
Violence

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ROGUE GALAXY
ITS TREASURES AREN'T.
PlayStation 2
LIVE IN YOUR W RLD.
PLAY IN URS.

Database

March 2006

01	Gears of War Xbox 360/Microsoft
02	Guitar Hero 2 w/guitar PS2/Activision
03	Madden NFL 2007 PS2/EA
04	Legend of Zelda Twilight Princess GC/Nintendo
05	Legend of Zelda Twilight Princess Wii/Nintendo
06	WWE Smackdown VS Raw 2007 PS2/THQ
07	New Super Mario Bros. NDS/Nintendo
08	Call of Duty 3 Xbox 360/Activision
09	Yoshi's Island 2 NDS/Nintendo
10	Call of Duty 3 PS2/Activision

01	Madden NFL PS2/EA 2.8 million
02	New Super Mario Bros. NDS/Nintendo 2.0 million
03	Gears of War Xbox 360/Microsoft 1.8 million
04	Kingdom Hearts II PS2/Square Enix 1.7 million
05	Guitar Hero 2 w/guitar PS2/Activision 1.3 million
06	Final Fantasy XII Ps2/Square Enix 1.3 million
07	Brain Age: Train Your Brain NDS/Nintendo 1.1 million
08	Madden NFL 2007 Xbox 360/EA 1.1 million units
09	Tom Clancy's GRAW Xbox 360/Ubisoft 1.0 million
10	NCAA Football PS2/EA 1.0 million units

01	Madden NFL 2007 EA
02	Call of Duty 3 Activision
03	Cars THQ
04	Need for Speed Carbon EA
05	Gears of War Microsoft
06	Guitar Hero 2 w/guitar Activision
07	Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy LucasArts
08	WWE Smackdown VS Raw THQ
09	Tony Hawks Project 8 Activision
10	Marvel: Ultimate Alliance Activision

01	Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess Wii
02	Crackdown Xbox 360
03	Gears of War Xbox 360
04	Blue Dragon Xbox 360
05	Motor Storm PS3
06	Sonic Rings Wii
07	Bullet Witch Xbox 360
08	Rogue Galaxy PS2
09	Spectrobes NDS
10	Calling All Cars PS3

Thought of the month:

Technology is only plastic deep:
Great games transcend system specs.

Random numbers:

Total Software Sales 2006: 12.5 Billion (2005 10.5 Billion)

Gears of War Xbox 360/Microsoft

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PSP
PlayStation Portable

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Atari	Available	March 1
Developer	Cavia	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	M

Bullet Witch

Bullet Witch

Things aren't looking so good for home sweet Earth circa 2013. After a massive earthquake, middle-east war, and global virus, the population has diminished to extinction levels followed by rampant anarchy capped off by a demon insurgence—armies of undead soldiers and massive monstrosities who've shown up to exterminate what's left of humanity and foreclose on the ravaged planet. But there's new hope. A powerful witch has waged a one-woman war on our unwelcome guests with her eye on sealing the portal from whence they came…a place that holds a very dark secret. Her name is Alicia and her gateway is your Xbox 360.

Brought to you by Cavia (Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex, Naruto: Uzumaki Chronicles), one of Japan's brightest up-and-coming studios, Bullet Witch is best described as a cross between Devil May Cry and Gungrave, only with next-gen accoutrements such as vast open worlds and unbelievable destructive set pieces. Alicia can topple everything from water towers to massive structures which, once fallen, she can use as platforms or cover. Everything destroyed stays on the field of play…with collision. Blow up a gas station and you can perch Alicia on the massive piles of rubble…cave in a subway on a group of unsuspecting freaks and it's mutant puree. As the game unfolds and the spells increase, the level of destruction becomes unprecedented. It's an impressive next-gen feature that drives home a heightened level of supernatural power—another next-gen milestone to rejoice, this time behind a beautiful witch.

Alicia's a breed apart compared to most video game heroines. There's nothing bimbolic about her. She has smallish breasts, is adorned in flowing gothic attire and carries a massive "Gun Rod," a personal WMD fashioned like a witch's boom/broom-stick. She exudes style, grace, and power all at the same time and animates beautifully. The Gun Rod is painstakingly normal-mapped, her robes flow in concert with her swift movement and her control is exactly as it should be, with the exception of a soft lock-on, but more about that later.

Alicia has two modes of attack: her Gun Rod—which can be modified to shotgun, cannon and Gatling gun forms as well as upgraded—and her spell circles—rings of spells called up by the LB trigger and unleashed by aiming and casting. Alicia begins the game with a powerful wave of energy—Willpower and Sacrifice—the ability to heal near-dead civilians…those expendable few stupid enough to wander around in the monsters' line of fire. It's a shame Alicia can't put them out of their misery. They mutter nonsense and look a mess. At least she can leave them to die and perform their annoying cycling animation no more. Throughout the game the voice in Alicia's head grants her more powerful magic as the fighting intensifies. Lightning strikes, hordes of ravens, body-piercing spears, tornadoes, elemental shots, and even meteor showers are at her beck and call, provided the magic gauge is full, and she'll need everything in her arsenal to turn back the monstrosities that Cavia have littered throughout the game. Each massive open-world area is occupied by taunting mutant troops. Some retreat, some bull-rush, and some snipe, within sealed barriers controlled by Walnut Heads: massive floating brains that Alicia

"Alicia can topple everything from water towers to massive structures..."

must burst to forge ahead. Walnut Heads harness powerful psychic energy, enough to hurl cars and even buses at Alicia, but they're stationary targets, unlike "Megas" and the game's massive bosses. Megas aren't so bad—they're 100-feet tall but slow and have a big weak spot, although their gun spray will kill you instantly—but the bosses and major offensives prove much trickier. The game's first intense battle finds Alicia on top of a passenger jet fighting a flying demon many times its size. It's not everyday you get to fight on the fuselage of a 747, carefully aiming lightning strikes between waves of ravenous eyeballs, so relish the difficulty, as well as the cut-scenes and the story. The game's leading man Maxwell Cougar may be your everyday token jarhead (although he actually has a p-cool haircut), but the story overall is quite good, as is the voice acting…aside from those dimwitted pedestrians.

As third-person shooters go, Bullet Witch is somewhat of a milestone, being the first to incorporate this level of destruction and magic. There's nothing to collect—no lame in-game symbols or floating doodads to taint the mood. Just 100% pure hardcore action: shooting, dodging, and casting whilst soaking in the gorgeous explosions and unprecedented destruction, all to a truly epic soundtrack. It's not without fault: the Alicia model doesn't support dynamic collision, the game takes place in the future and all of the cars are from the '70s, aiming can be dodgy (even though the game has a sensitivity feature and zoom) due to the lack of a lock-on (which would make the game too easy, so let's call it even), and those civilians do look and act a mess, but these are small hitches within a massive and massively engaging game, localized with great care for its US debut. Gaming's seminal female spellcaster has arrived. Let's give her a warm welcome. **play**

She came, she saw, she blew it the f--k up.

Bullet Witch

score 8.5

+ Massive destructible environments, epic soundtrack, deep magic system, huge bosses, quick loadtimes, beautiful new engine

– Annoying dynamic collision, bout of magic fa

interview
team cavia

play: This is by far your biggest game in terms of open space. Did you develop the engine from scratch?
Since we were dealing with brand-new hardware when we started developing the game, we developed the engine totally from scratch. The original plan was to use open space to allow wild effects when magic is used, but the concept of being able to play in a massive city area without any loading, which surpassed the standards of gaming at the time, was something we really struggled with.

It's remarkable how fast the game reloads when you lose a life. Was this a priority?
Basically, the player often loses a life in Bullet Witch. The reason behind that was we had in our mind a picture of giving users certain 'nice and cool' feelings when they realized the strategy of using magic & gun combinations. At the same time, it didn't fit in our image that a fragile looking female 'does not die' so we made it rather easier to lose a life. Because of all those reasons, we wanted players to use 'trial & error' without the stress of long loading times.

What did you find most challenging working with open-world environments?
As mentioned, we attempted to have very large areas read without any loading. Having loading times at various sections in a large area causes stress for the player, and we did not want to have to resort to that. However, even with the power of the Xbox 360 there were limits, and until the middle of the development period it was not possible to move freely around these large maps as it is now. Of course we didn't want any drop in processing power in an action game, but we also didn't want to cut the maps up into smaller pieces and put in loading. We struggled with this dilemma until the very end, but ultimately I think it all fit together.

How difficult would it have been to make the glass shatter and for bullets to leave marks in such a big expense?
This is case-by-case. Having glass shatter is technically possible, as is bullets leaving marks. Games are a battle with processing power. We included as much of our design as the processor would allow, and had to leave out some of the things the processor couldn't handle, starting with the lowest priority items and working up.

Alicia's flipping/dodging animation reminds me of Motoko Kusanagi's. Any relation? Ghost in the Shell was great by the way.
Thank you very much. Ghost in the Shell was also developed by our company, and in fact the same development team was also involved in Bullet Witch.

Is this an original Cavia game and character?
That's right.

Is this the game you intend to be your cornerstone/franchise? She certainly has the goods.
Thank you very much. This is original content for AQ Interactive and we would very much like to continue developing it closely in the future. We are confident that Alicia is a very appealing character and think it would be great if we could expand the property out in various ways.

The Megas are some big monsters... They are also the only things that Alicia can't jump onto when they fall. Too complex?
The main concept of this character was to make them huge. As it is a game played in open space, we wanted a situation that really makes you have to look up. But without removing the enemy or removing collision made controlling them difficult within the constraints of the hardware, so it wasn't possible to allow the player to jump onto them.

What about making Alicia's feet conform to slopes in the game? Would that be impossible given this game's complexity?

You're asking all the harsh questions (laughs). We supported undulations using IK, but the more detailed calculations you perform the more processing power it consumes. This was one of the elements that we gave up on in order to maintain a smooth overall game.

Is there anything you're not happy with that you would improve in a sequel?
Lots of things (laughs). I can tell you that many original titles are caught between game quality and development time. The gameplay is not established, and the first goal is to make something that will be fun to play. While trying to do that, you have a fixed development period, and so many things end up just not fitting in. Looking at it from that point of view, I'd like to have included more enemies, developed the AI more, or improved the quality of the graphics... there's no end once I start thinking those things. It would be nice to make the gameplay sharper, too.

How was the game received in Japan?
There is a strong impression that the core users have taken to it. Those who like it really seem to like it. Although the element that the TPS genre is not all that popular in Japan caused us some grief, I feel that we achieved a certain level of results. If you add in the fact that this is not a title released by a big publisher, it could be said that we came out on top.

The music is just amazing. Was it done in-house? Will you release a soundtrack in Japan?
Thank you for that kind comment. The concept for the music was determined by our company and an outsourcing studio, with the outsourcer then producing the music. We were aiming for a cinematic feel to the visuals and so we have the BGM made on a large scale, too. The music was well received in Japan, too, and a soundtrack has been released. Music is a vital element in games in relaying the world view, and I think we worked with an excellent studio.

Have you started work on or considered a sequel?
Hummm, that's a tough question (laughs). I think this content has a very unique world view and gameplay, and very appealing characters. My personal opinion is that ending this after just one game would be a waste. But that is ultimately just my personal opinion... If it is popular overseas then I am sure we'll be able to make one! So please, everyone buy it! (laughs)

Can you tell I want a sequel?
That you'd go that far almost makes me cry, I'm so happy. First and foremost it is vital that overseas users accept the game. It'll be great if the number of fans like you really increase! If that happens, we'll definitely make another!

Have you dabbled with the PS3? Is it as hard to program on as they say?
Of course, I have dabbled. Rather than being hard to program, my impression is that the hardware itself is different from what we have known until now, meaning you need to totally change your way of thinking.

How do you like the 360?
It is very easy hardware to develop for. It also has the LIVE functions, which I am expecting much from in the future. I think the point of being able to casually enjoy high spec games is a very important one.

How long did Bullet Witch take to complete by the way, and how big was the team?
Taken from the planning proposals I think around 2 years. At the time there wasn't hide nor hair of the 360 to be seen and so it was all just day-dreaming (laughs). If outsourced staff are included then the final team size was around 100 people, I believe.

interview
matt rush

US Producer Atari

play: You must have been pretty excited when Atari handed you Bullet Witch... It had some warts but this is quite a game. Cavia is fast becoming one of Japan's most prominent developers.
Matt Rush: Actually...Yes! Bullet Witch is my kind of title and the 360 is a great platform. Did I mention that BW will be exclusively on the Xbox 360? Cavia is a talented developer. They had a vision for a new kind of witch, instead of an old witch with warts, they created a new, young, beautiful witch that carries a big gun and causes mass destruction...this time for the betterment of humanity.

Speaking of those old warts...you ordered quite a few changes to make the game all it can be. Let's run those down. First off, I love the demons. They seem to thoroughly enjoy terrorizing what's left of humanity right up until Alicia smokes 'em. Were they this funny in the Japanese version? The snipers are especially pathetic.
The demons are hilarious. Try sneaking up on a sniper... very rewarding. As far as changes, Cavia did their best to make as many improvements and adjustments for the US release. The voiceovers were extremely important since there are a lot of subtleties that are crucial to the story and feel of BW, so time was spent on this and localization. The shooting view was adjusted, [there were] AI tweaks, improved textures, collision, and polish.

Regarding the textures: There seems to be more normal-mapping. Was there less before? Or did you more or less have them clean up what was already there?
You know how that is, you give a developer more time, and there's going to be more normal-mapping.

What about the difficulty? The import was a cakewalk but on normal the US game is quite a challenge. The AI is really cool too, especially in the later stages with the faster demons, bull rushers and ambushes. Was any of this in the import or were they just cannon fodder?
The idea was to challenge the player and also to encourage US players to use Alicia's witchcraft more, since US gamers are more likely to run and gun.

Maxwell Cougar is the cheesiest name ever, but it works since the man is so cliché. Did Cavia come up with that one?
Yep. A lot of his mannerisms are over the top which turns out being really funny. Especially some really smooth moves he displays in the cut-scenes. I love the ending. I'm going to cop his style.

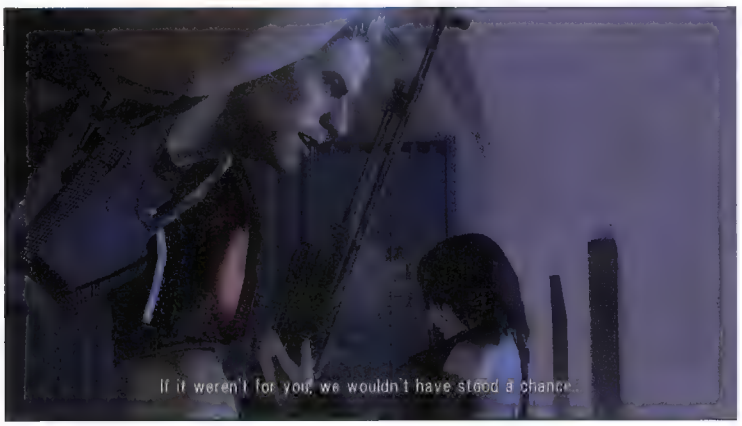
Atari needs a strong next-gen franchise and Bullet Witch seems perfect. Third-person shooting is hot right now: Alicia dishes out probably the best magic/devastation to date and she's beautiful without being a token bimbo. Has Atari ordered a second game? Is it at least being considered?
I appreciate those comments, thank you.

"The idea was to challenge the player and also to encourage US players to use Alicia's witchcraft more...

Bullet Witch is a completely new and original IP. If fans show BW enough love and support then anything is possible.

I noticed an option for additional outfits. Are they available via Live or simply by beating the game? Do they get skimpy?
The costumes are hot… the first costume pack which will be available for download at launch is the much desired Schoolgirl outfit and it will come with three Concept Missions including a favorite called Dynamite Beauty. There will be five costumes in total, all with fantasy-like themes including a White Witch, Secretary, Mummy and even a Pixie outfit with wings. There's nothing like killing demons in your favorite pair of stilettos.

Alicia close up: Masterfully made in-game

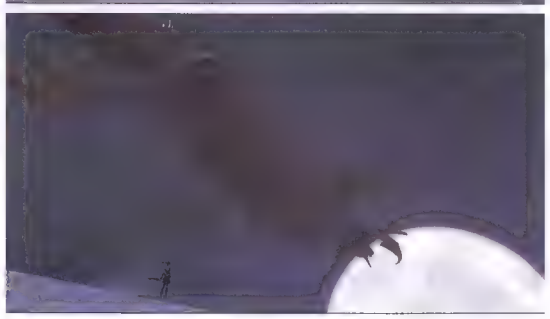


Is there anything you couldn't get to? Are you happy with every aspect of the final game?
There's always going to be something else to strive for but we have succeeded in creating a fun and immersive world that I hope gamers will find memorable and long for more.

What exactly are the downloadable concept missions? Is this an all-new feature?
This was a great way to showcase the creative liberties designers can take when creating additional content for games. Missions like "hide-and-seek" with the demons and being chased by the caterpillar people are a couple that come to mind. They're entertaining scenarios that allow players to exploit the physics and explosions found in the game in amusing ways. Much fun.

What would you like to see in a sequel? And don't say multiplayer!
A sister for Alicia.

Ooh, I like that. Whatever you do, just don't let anyone call Uwe Boll…
Amen.



Unfriendly Skies

And you thought your last flight sucked...

System(s)	PS3	Publisher	SCEA
Developer	Incog	Available	March

Calling All Cars

One crazy caper

words **Brady Fiechter**

When the demanding three years it took to create God of War finally came to an end, director David Jaffe decided it was time for a new focus. He was done with epic monstrosities, pining for the purity of a game with classic arcade sensibilities. Something simple, something fun. That game turned out to be Calling All Cars, which debuts on the PlayStation Store in March—for less than ten bucks. Jaffe describes the high concept as an "NFL Blitz, NBA JAM, Bomberman kind of party game." It works like this: a criminal runs loose in one of four vibrant, themed levels, and it's your job to maniacally drive your car of choice to make a capture, while avoiding the three other players who are after the same prize, which must be delivered to either a one point, two point, or three point jail drop. You've got a magnet, a missile, and a hammer to dismantle your opponent's chase; a jump mechanic, turbo boost and finite nitrous reserve are you basic functions for the whacky vehicles, which all drive and feel the same. The gameplay is meant to be chaotic and filled with a constant back-and-forth energy, as you bounce the criminal from one car to the next, desperately seeking a drop off at the jail.

After playing a quick 5 minute demo of Calling All Cars with Jaffe over the network, we took time out to discuss the game and where he's at with this new direction of game design.

Run, but you can't hide...

interview
david jaffe

play: What's your philosophy behind making a smaller game in the downloadable space?
David Jaffe: It's almost like a lot of times when you make a game you end up, you don't fill it with fluff necessarily, but you're almost a slave to the fact that you know the end product is a 60 dollar retail disc. And a lot of times you make choices for your games and your designs that aren't necessarily the best for the game or the best for the consumer, but you feel obligated and the consumer feels obligated to get your 60 dollars worth. So now, when you look at, say, Twisted Metal Black, we really found that there were anywhere from like three to five out of about 15 levels that people played. But we had to put all that effort and money and time into making all these other levels that people probably only played a small percentage of the time. And I think the same thing applies to deathmatch games and things like that. So with a game like this, it was really nice to say, look, for 10 dollars, it's not that the expectation of quality should be lower, but there isn't the expectation that the experience needs to be as thick, basically. It's nice to know exactly what the game needs to be, versus trying to make a sitcom, and saying, let's add 75 more minutes to a Seinfeld episode, just because that's what the retail environment demands, versus what is actually good for that episode of Seinfeld. It's been great, for a lot of reasons, working in this download space, because you can really tailor the game for what it needs to be rather than what retail demands for some arbitrary reason.

By doing episodic content, do you think players might feel cheated, like they're not getting the full pie, and just digging into a few pieces?
I think absolutely, it depends on the game. I don't look at Calling All Cars like it's episodic. I look at it like, for 10 dollars, you are getting the full impact of what Calling All Cars is. Now, that package can expand down the road if people are interested in expanding, but if anybody plays Calling All Cars and feels they're not getting a complete gaming meal, then we haven't done our job right. And I don't think that's inherent in the aspect of downloadable games, any more than someone who downloads an album from iTunes feels like they're not getting the whole package. It's just a different delivery medium and allows us to design a bit differently.

Did you like the purity of not having to tack a story onto Calling All Cars?
I was so thrilled not having to put a story or cut scenes or anything… The idea behind this came out of God of War, which we spent three years really trying to mix gameplay and storytelling together. Some of it worked and some of it didn't work. What occurred to me was that, whether or not it's successful, both critically and commercially, the attempt on Calling All Cars was to really get to the heart of gameplay and the nuts and bolts of fun, interactivity, without all the fat on top of it. And that's not to say that the fat on top of games doesn't work or isn't valuable for certain kinds of games, but what I found with God of War was, what I really enjoyed was that tangible sense of fun that games can bring and no other medium can. So it was almost like, why am I trying, why are the teams I'm working with trying so hard to blend this stuff together when our medium already has its language and its ability that it does very well. It was a bit of an epiphany, like we've been barking, not up the wrong tree, but a tree we don't necessarily have to bark up. If you have a fun game, that's just as noble an experiment and noble a product to put out into the market as a game layered with depth and story and character. So I was thrilled to be working on a game without all that. It was great.

> "Games provide great emotions, they're just different kinds of emotions."
>
> ~David Jaffe, Creative Director, Sony Santa Monica

I read an interesting article about theories of psychology behind why we play games. What is your psychology behind making a game?
Games provide great emotions, they're just different kinds of emotions. And the emotions I want to elicit in Calling All Cars are emotions like tension, the thrill of competition, the camaraderie of playing with friends. And these aren't fresh emotions for video games, these are emotions that the best multiplayer games elicit. Even in single-player games, philosophically speaking, I totally think it's accurate that games already illicit specific emotions; let's get really good at doing that well, and doing that better. I was thinking today while I was driving in, the new challenge for me is not so much how do I elicit emotions like movies, because I ultimately don't think that's possible. The minute you give someone control, it becomes a challenge. It becomes something they're trying to achieve. And it doesn't mean they can't be immersed, it doesn't mean they can't be moved, but I don't think they can be moved like they can in linear media, where you're not in control. So then the question becomes, we know we can do tension, we know we can do competition, we know we can do fear, but what other emotions can interactivity elicit? That's the next frontier for me. I'm eager to design a game that really taps into what video games can do well, but try to toy with some new emotions. I think that's a really fun thing to experiment with, something I plan on doing with the next stuff that I'm designing.

When you transition from a God of War to something like this, do you readjust

the way you create, or bring a similar set of passions and motives?
Well, passions, absolutely. This is exactly the kind of game I want to be making right now. And a lot of it did come from what I learned off God of War, so the same level of passion that I bring, that Sony brings, the guys at Incognito bring, that hasn't changed at all. In terms of the development process, it's actually quite different. It's like editing film or mixing music… you really only have about 20 pieces, and if you add one little thing the whole color of that game changes, just like if you add one little clip in the middle of a scene, and the whole nuance of that scene changes. This is very much having to think about it globally, every choice you make affects everything globally. In Calling All Cars, you've got these pieces, and it's like I imagine mixing a piece of music, or orchestrating a piece of music, it's all one big orchestra—like how fast the paddy wagon moves, how high the criminal pops into the air, how much the missile hones, those are like your various instruments on how your mixing them together to create this emotion of competition and tension and camaraderie among the players. I think it's a very different way of designing a game and I enjoy this one so much better.

How can you be satisfied that the blend is just right? Is it just instinct?
When I play the game, I get the emotions I want. I can't really play God of War anymore. It's too linear and I know everything that's going to happen. In this game, because it's multiplayer, because it's emergent in terms of what's going to happen, I can totally get into the game just like anybody else. I'm feeling the emotions from the game that I want players to play. When you ask, are you satisfied, I can tell you that the game is making me feel the way I wanted to feel. So I'm very satisfied with that. What I don't know is how other people are going to respond to it.

You're sensibilities as a designer are constantly changing. Are you still getting your bearings as a creator?
I remember saying something to these

> "I think it's a very different way of designing a game and I enjoy this one so much better."
>
> –David Jaffe

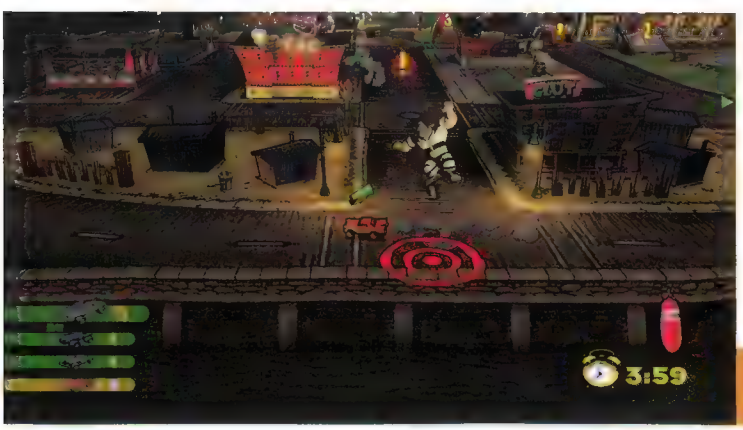
journalists yesterday, and I heard myself say this on camera, and there was an immediate kind of, don't say that, because it's not good for your career. And what I said was, I have kids now, I'm married now, I don't have the interest and time to sit down and play a 50 hour epic game. It doesn't do it for me anymore. And when I immediately said that, it was like, Oh, I'm gonna turn off a bunch of gamers by saying that. But at the same time, I was like, you know, I think that's the way anybody who does creative work grows, they allow themselves to still embrace the craft that they love some much, but allow their real life to influence their craft and what they like to do. When you say, are you trying to get your bearings, all I'm trying to do is still express my love for interactivity that I've had since I was a kid and hasn't waned one bit. But I'm trying to work on this stuff to allow it to reflect on who I am now, as a 35-year-old father and husband, versus a 20 year old kid in college who can spend 20 hours, 30 hours on a game.

Do you think the gamers brought up on PlayStation, PlayStation 2, are even interested in these simpler, classically tuned games? I wonder if you're reaching an audience that hasn't been catered to for too long, the guy who's been around for a while and appreciates nostalgic experiences.
I don't know how much of that audience is out there. I'd like to think that people who have 600 dollars to spend on a game system, probably have jobs, probably have responsibilities beyond just playing games. I'd like to think we're putting a game out there that will speak to a large percentage of the audience that has purchased and will continue to purchase the PS3, but, I don't know… I have no clue if there will be an audience, as I grow, who will grow with me. I can't imagine there won't be though. I like to think that there will be an audience that grows with designers my age. If not, I get in line behind some other director who's making the next 30 hour epic, and I'll contribute what I can. But for me personally, I can't throw my life into those games right now. They don't speak to me like they used to. Maybe when my kids go off to college. It's not that I don't love those types of games. I would love to pour 60 hours into Oblivion. But it's just not realistic.

Five years ago, you probably couldn't have made a game like Calling All Cars.
No. Because really, there would have been no way to distribute it. People have asked me, what is the most significant thing in next gen, and everybody expects the answer to be physics and graphics. The most significant thing about all three of these new platforms is the ability to get original content over the internet. Console-based quality, original content over the internet. Suddenly our version of independent film, of HBO original programming, is actually there. Calling All Cars is [nothing in cost] compared to the huge games today that are 20, 30 million dollars. I hope gamers show up and notice that, on the PlayStation Store, there are games out there that are less expensive that are loaded with fun, loaded with quality, loaded with neat ideas. But yeah, five years ago there would have been no way to get this out.

As a game designer, what are you still trying to better yourself at?
I don't know, not because I think I've got everything down, but because… I'm not able to hold my own in conversations with other game designers. They would have a better answer to your question because they think about game design to an extent that they say, Oh, I need to get better at making games that are more emergent, or I need to get better at control schemes or user interface or whatever. I don't really think about those things. I think more about, this is the game I want, this is how I want it to feel, the general way I want to make it play out. I never really stop and think about the individual elements coming together to create that effect. I guess if I gave it a lot of thought I could come up with something more, but I don't think I'm a great game designer. I don't really have a good answer, which probably reflects on how bad of a game designer I am [laughs]. I guess I can't really go through a list of what I'm not very strong at.

Will you ever approach a game that tackles some serious themes? Or are we just treating games to seriously and it's time to just focus on fun?
One of the reasons Calling All Cars has been so much fun for me to work on, and I hope it will be fun for players to play, is because for me, I have embraced what I feel is the strength of video games, which is fun, which is interactivity. Which is more of the sporting aspects of video games. Now it may be, and maybe this is my limitation as a game designer, that I don't know how much deeper games can ultimately be in our lifetime. I love the idea of games being spiritual and meaningful and about something, but I also think if you really want to tackle the question, we have to ask ourselves, why is there so much talk about it, and so little execution of it. Games have been around realistically, let's say, 35 years. And there's a four thousand year history for games, if you go back to ancient games like Parcheesi in India. In all of that time, there has been very little evidence to suggest that interactive experiences are leading to a path that is going to deal with emotional, religious, political issues. It doesn't mean they won't go down that road. But if you compare that to drama, be it on stage, in a book, or a movie or a comic book, and you look how quickly drama evolved to a place that it could evoke emotions and deal with serious subjects, you do begin to question, are we in the video game industry trying to do something our medium can't do but wish it could. Or maybe it's just not capable yet.



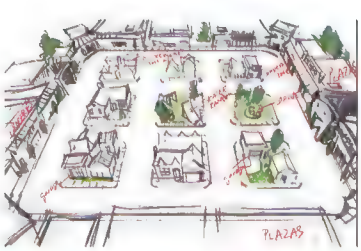
Maybe we're now where, like Will Wright once told me, it's like we're all climbing Mount Everest, and there's gonna be all these dead bodies along the way. But ultimately every person who tries to make that journey is gonna get a little bit closer to the summit, and one day we're gonna be at the summit. Now I would be a fool if I assumed I knew more than Will Wright about game design, but from my smaller perspective, I just don't see how we're ever going to get to that summit. Right now, I'm just focused on making games like Calling All Cars.

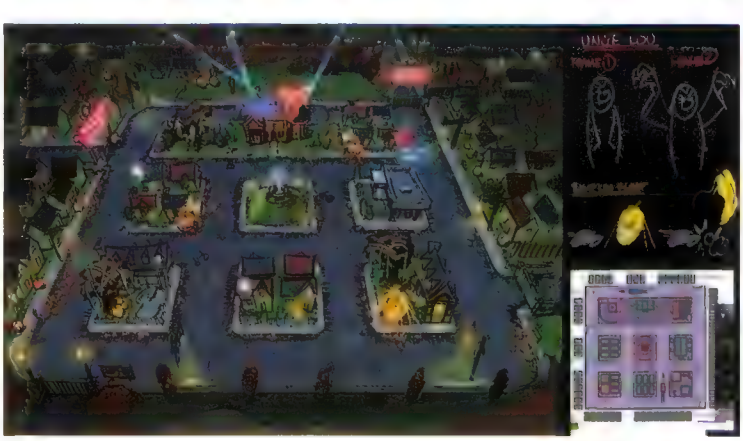
How do you think gamers ultimately perceive the perception of a 10 dollar game? I think it's easy to pass them off as rather insubstantial.
You know, that is the perception that drives me up the wall and I want to see change. You've got to be able to communicate to players, if it's on the PlayStation Store, a lot of these games cost you 10 bucks, 20 bucks, 5 bucks, but you're gonna be getting a real game. It's not shovelwear. And how do we communicate that? By putting out enough good games.

I like that you can pick up Calling All Cars and immediately get into it. Even God of War had that quality. It feels right and engaging from the start.
If you look at a design document of my first game... [Jaffe shows me a bible-size folder]. That's a massive design document. My design documents now are about 5 pages long. When you talk about picking up the controls, iteration is everything in a video game. Trying it again and trying it again, getting the tuners and tweakers in there, working with the programmers. You can't write that. You can write, I want a game to feel really good, but it's irrelevant.
It's interesting to me from a design standpoint, seeing how many different variables could be toyed with in the game. Like how do you decide on, say, three weapons instead of six?
We actually had about six weapons to begin with. If you look at it, you've got medium range, which is the magnet, long range, which is the missile, and short range, which is the hammer. All three of those weapons cover all three ranges, there's a double defense against all three. I'll get into some specifics here... For example, we used to have a ground mine, like a land mine. And what ended up happening was, we got into situations where, let's say you had the criminal, and I was chasing you, and there was nothing I could do about it. It created a disengagement in the player who was chasing you, because it was like, I can't catch up to you, I don't have a weapon to do anything, and the minute we threw the ground mine out of the cue, the frequency that you would have a forward-facing weapon or a radial weapon went up 25 percent. And the minute we added the nitro, which gave you a sudden burst of speed that we charge, that suddenly gave you another option to deal with those situations. So now, even when you're chasing somebody and you don't have anything and you use up your nitro, you still have that mental gameplay of, "Oh shit, I hope my nitro fills up fast enough that I can reach him, and hit him before he gets to the jail." The minute we started pulling out weapons, the game just got better. A lot of games would have forced us to say, wait, we need 20 weapons, we need 15 weapons, but it really is about, this is what's best for the game. In the same way an off-Broadway play doesn't need a cast of thousands to tell a story. I think we feel more comfortable making those types of design decisions, basically when you're putting it on the PlayStation network and selling at as an original boutique PlayStation network game versus a 60 dollar Blu-ray game. From a design, nuts-and-bolts standpoint, it really is a profound shift in the way you think about designing games.

> "From a design, nuts-and-bolts standpoint, it really is a profound shift in the way you think about designing games."
>
> ~David Jaffe

Does it feel good to be done? Does shifting gears from something like God of War to this totally different territory make you nervous at all?
No, because you know what, I'm happy. I wouldn't want to go back. As proud of I am of God of War 2, as the creative director, and more specifically as proud as I am of the team downstairs that made God of War 2. I wouldn't want to go back to making a game like that for all the tea in China. This is the path I need to be on right now. Like I said, I hope that path allows me to continue this amazing relationship I've had with Sony for 13 years. I don't mean to sound cheese ball, but it makes my soul happy doing games like this right now. And maybe 5 years from now it'll be something different. But I think we need people making games that follow that internal barometer, because I think we get good stuff that way. **play**





System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Atlus
Developer	Atlus	Available	Summer 2007

Odin's Sphere

A beautiful new day for 2D

words Dave Halverson

Anyone who reads Play on a regular basis has probably noticed a few references I've made of late concerning what I deem to be the ultimate life-altering video game experience of the decade. I'm the first one to admit that I get excited, sometimes overly depending on who you ask, about many a "quirky" game such as Blinx, Voodoo Vince, Psychonauts, Death Jr., Kameo… but this is different. This is the game I've waited 11 years for: The first next-gen hand-drawn 2D game since Symphony of the Night.

I've always contended that next-gen 2D would be so utterly spectacular that it would reignite the category and make 90% of what's out there in 3D land look primitive, and, well when you're right, you're right. Odin's Sphere is on the PS2 and it's among the most beautiful video games I have ever seen. What Astal and Clockwork Knight were to the Saturn, Odin's Sphere is even more so to the PS2. If you've been playing games since the 16-bit era…have the tissues ready.

> "Odin's Sphere is on the PS2 and it's among the most beautiful video games I have ever seen."

The sequel to the little known Sega Saturn import Princess Crown, Odin's Sphere is a side-scrolling action/RPG rooted in Viking-age fantasy where we find the fairies of Ringford and the warriors of Ragnanival in a bloody war. A war that unbeknownst to them represents an ancient prophecy that if fulfilled will lead to the destruction of the entire world. If Princess Crown had one flaw it was that the princess was too much a little girl for the game to have a prayer in the US. Princess Gwendolyn, daughter of Odin, however, is a beautiful young woman, with wings of an angel.

Layers: When Gwendolyn walks the screen comes alive.

If ever pictures did a game complete injustice, you're looking at them. They're not the sharpest, but moreover what you can't see is a heretofore unseen level of detail and animation. Not only are these characters articulated, but each body is made up of many intricate pieces, so, for example, Odin's armor consists of many plates, components that all move separately in concert with his movement and even breathing. Many of the game's characters are comprised of many individual pulsating layers, creating moving art that looks as though you're looking at PS4. Polygons can and will never look this good.

Spending a few minutes playing the game, the action and systems are masterfully executed, and the feel so completely wonderful that it almost makes you weep that games, for the most part, have lost their soul. If there's any justice left in the world, this is the game that will wake publishers up to the world of console 2D. What next-gen 2D would give us…well, when you see Odin's Sphere, you'll see the light.

Atlus is rolling out the red carpet for Odin's Sphere with fully-voiced dialogue to go with the game's wonderful story and alchemy/cooking system—one of many nuances that make Odin's Sphere anything but conventional. We'll have the full story behind the game and its development in our May cover story. **play**

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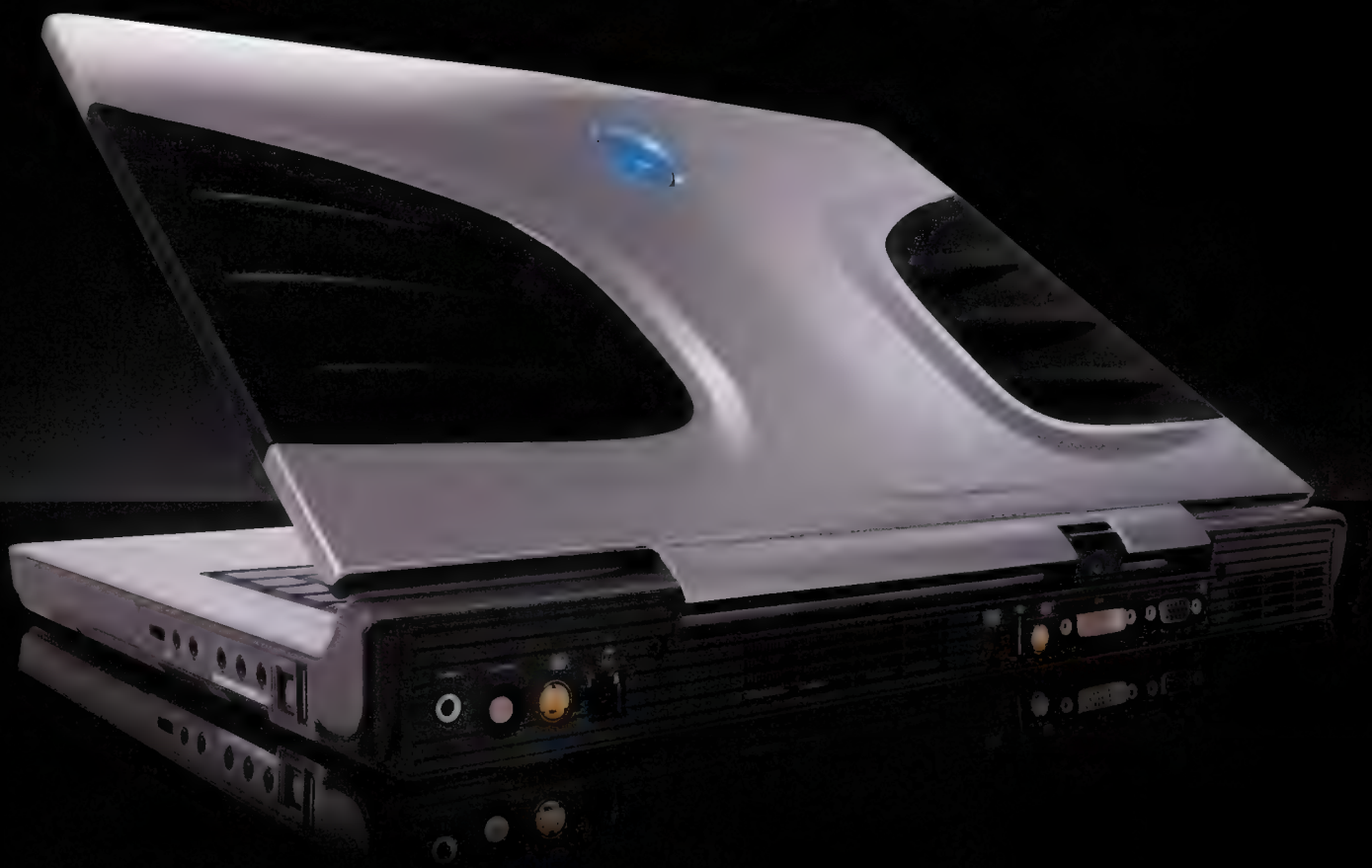

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System(s)	Wii	Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Ubisoft	Available	March

Prince of Persia
Rival Swords
Wii Could Be Heroes

words **Greg Orlando**

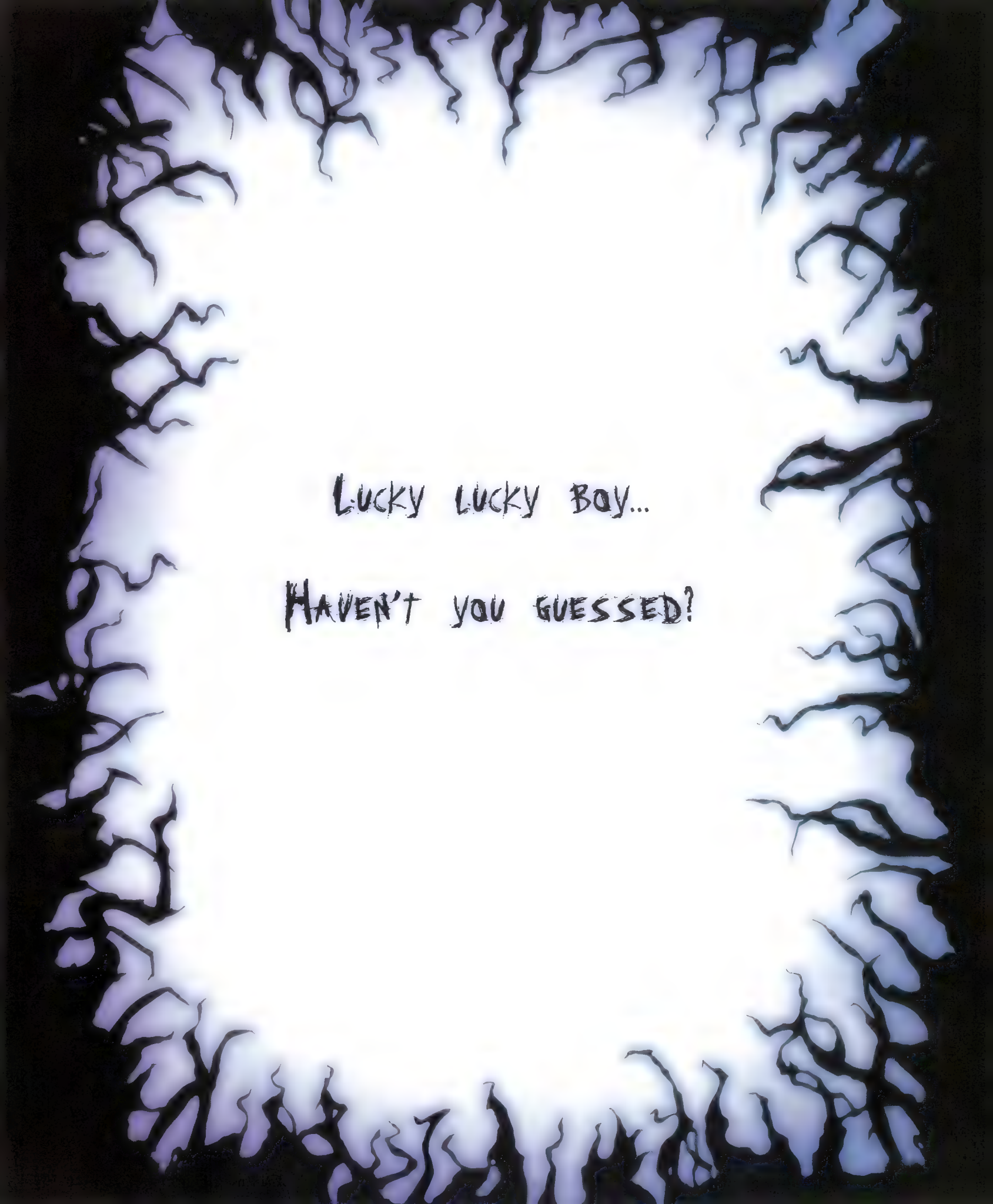
If there was any justice in the world, Ubisoft would re-release 2005's Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones as Prince of Persia: Rival Swords and Play would herald the title by re-running its preview for Thrones, only this time placing a small starburst that read "Now with Wii-specific controls!" atop the original text.

The Wii version of Swords, save for its control scheme, won't include any new levels or options. This is odd considering the PSP Swords includes levels and multiplayer options (notably a two-player chariot race) that are exclusive to that version.

To be fair, the Wii-based alterations to the game are quite fitting. The prince is nothing if not a dexterous, athletic hero, yet controlling him has always been a passive couch-and-controller experience. This time around, players will be required to make real, physical movements in order to guide him. Stabbing forward with the Wii remote enables the prince to do a plant move with his daggers, implanting them into a wall to create a makeshift platform. When it comes time to drive a chariot, a quick flick of the wrist holding the remote whips the horses, causing them to run faster for a brief spell. On narrow platforms, players balance the prince by tilting the remote; stealth attack "speed kills" utilize both the Wii nunchuk controller and the remote to sneak up on a foe and then complete a series of timed strikes, respectively.

A schizophrenic third-person adventure, Swords features two playable heroes in the prince and his twisted alter-ego the dark prince. Beyond the heroes' look and perspective, Ubisoft thought to further distinguish the duo by making their play styles decidedly different. The game relies heavily on platforming, puzzle solving, and stealth while the prince is being controlled; Here, players are rewarded for thinking things through, for moving cautiously, and taking a strategic approach. As the dark prince, Swords embraces a more smashmouth mindset; this more primal, unrestrained, and malevolent version of his majesty has a spiked, whiplike weapon and gets to put it to good use eviscerating enemies in what is, more or less, an extended sequence of brawls.

Together, the heroes are tasked with restoring Babylon to its former glory and seeking vengeance on the no-goodnik vizier responsible for the murder of the prince's love interest. It's intriguing stuff, and no one can take issue with either the game's plot or its action-laden platforming. The feeling of déjà vu all over again, sadly, won't be easily escaped, not even when players are jabbing their remotes to make an onscreen prince dance like a Middle-eastern M.C. Hammer. **play**


LUCKY LUCKY BOY...
HAVEN'T YOU GUESSED?

System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	From Software	Available	March

Enchanted Arms

Call to Arms

words Greg Orlando

Ubisoft is bringing the force of Arms to the PlayStation 3 come March. The turn-based role-playing game Enchanted Arms, crafted originally to the Xbox 360, is being ported over with a host of new features.

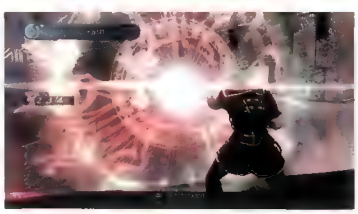
Turn-based, and more than a little goofy, Arms' threw up young Atsuma as its hero. Atsuma, a talented magician, was possessed of the game's titular enchanted arm, which absorbed the essence of defeated enemies. The "Arms," then, was just someone's mistranslation. Unless, of course, developer From Software simply assumed that Atsuma had two arms, even if only one of them was, in fact, enchanted.

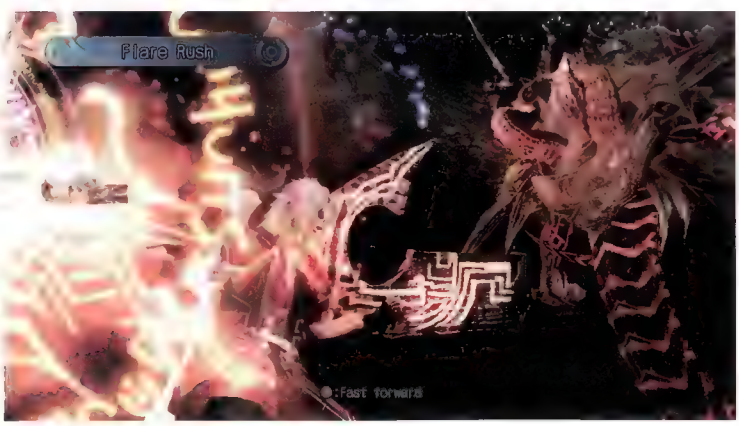
Regardless, Atsuma caught wind of the impending resumption of an ages-old war and, with the aid of his friends, set out on a grand adventure. On the surface, the game was standard Japanese RPG fare, complete with random battles, treasure chests, spiky-haired youths tossing spells to excess, and vitality-restoring checkpoints.

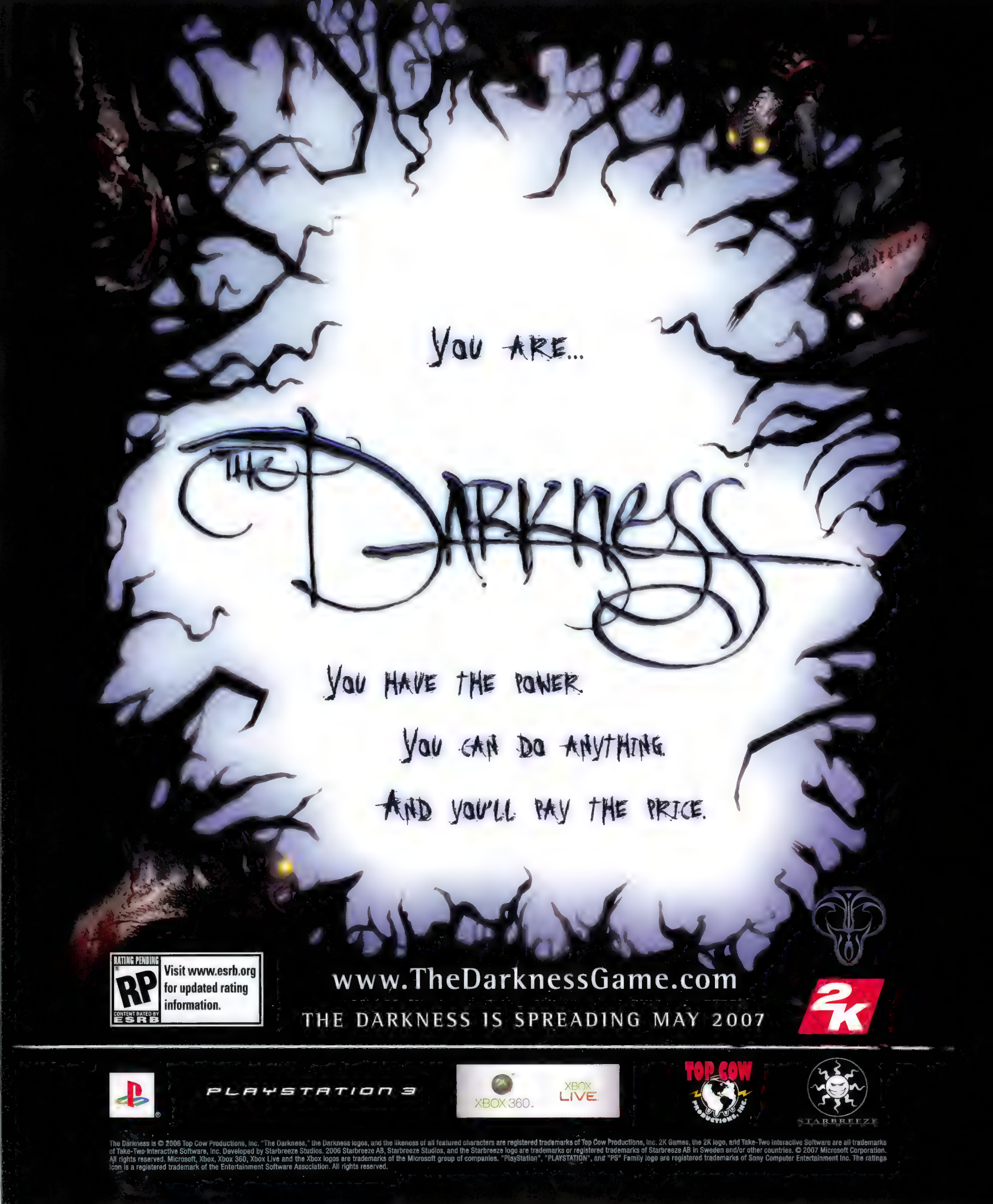
Yet Arms proved to be offbeat in many ways. It offered a blatantly homosexual character to Atsuma's party, and although the character's lispy, effeminate speech and mannerisms were stock and trite, the addition at least hinted of a rounder world view. Captured beasties also added whimsy and strategic value to Arms' play; here, players could snare and control about 100 different creatures, and Arms gave players a lot of options as to who or what they could take into a four-man battle party. It was possible, then, to take Atsuma into a fight alongside a pizza-faced monster, a mermaid, and a giant walking tree.

In a nod seemingly to its own flaws, a speed battle system was enacted wherein players could defer some or all of the game's combat duties to the artificial intelligence. In doing so, players could fast forward through fights. This was handy, but ultimately self-defeating as it de-emphasized and, certainly, trivialized one of the game's most interesting features. Arms, as it was presented for the Xbox 360, was also criticized for its English voice work, which alternated between atrocious and abominable.

In terms of Arms' proliferation, Ubisoft plans to address some of the game's flaws for the PlayStation 3 version, as well as improve on its strengths. From Software is adding more than 30 new creatures—the game calls them golems—that can be unlocked and added to the player's adventuring party. Ten minutes of new video footage has been tacked on, too, and players can now opt to play the game in its original Japanese, or in a brand-new English-language track to replace the old, and severely flawed voice work of the Xbox 360 version. Ubisoft has also made extensive use of the PlayStation 3's motion-sensitive Sixaxis controller for Enchanted Arms, with different movements to create powerful weapon strikes, solve in-game puzzles during exploration, replenish the main character's Ex power meter, and unlock other special moves. **play**







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System(s)	PS3/360	Publisher	Koei
Developer	Koei	Available	Q2 2007

Fatal Inertia

In physics we trust

Heather Campbell

With each generation of hardware released, games advance less and less by way of visuals. Certainly, the leap from the PS2 to the PS3 was not as dynamic as the leap from, say, SNES to N64. Gamers looking for a superficial graphics fix are going to be initially disappointed by what the PS3 offers.

What is going to be immediately impressive in these next-generation machines is advanced physics and AI. Perhaps gamers will look back at PS2 not so much as an inferior polygon muncher, but as a quaint system trapped in the age of faked physics.

Take Fatal Inertia, for example. A new racer by Koei (of Dynasty Warriors and ... Dynasty Warriors 3), Fatal Inertia is an F-Zero style hovercraft racing game. What sets it apart from a crowded field is the licensed use of the Unreal Engine 3 to provide gamers with a unique set of physics-based weaponry. As an enemy races ahead, players can engage the environment to thwart their rivals' progress. The Inertia of the game's title isn't just clever marketing; it's a reference to the real energy that pilots will encounter as they speed across the courses.

Set in the 22nd century, Fatal Inertia concerns the development of a new pastime that molds street racing, rally, and demolition derby into one high-stakes sport. Racers fly through realistic, natural courses that offer many paths to victory, whether by speed or by offense. Players can modify their vehicles, not only to include new engines, but also to involve new weaponry. Among these futuristic weapons are magnets, rockets, force fields, smoke screens, and EMPs—each weapon designed to use the Unreal Engine to maximum effect. Additionally, there are four types of racers to augment, so players can truly personalize their playing experience.

Looking like MotorStorm on speed, many of the environments so far are arid and dry. But Koei promises races around "Glacial Cliffs," so gamers know that the future holds more places to test their Unreal engines on. As the release date draws near, we'll see whether Koei has what it takes to make a fast-paced action-racer ... or if they should stick with historic fighters. Maybe Inertia will mark the start of a new dynasty. **play**

"Looking like MotorStorm on speed, many of the environments so far are arid and dry."

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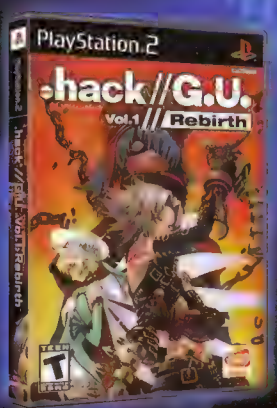

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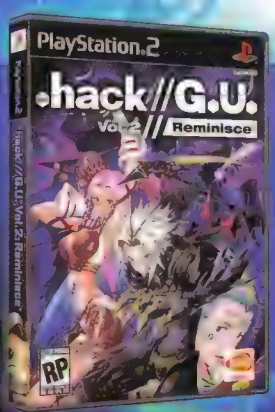

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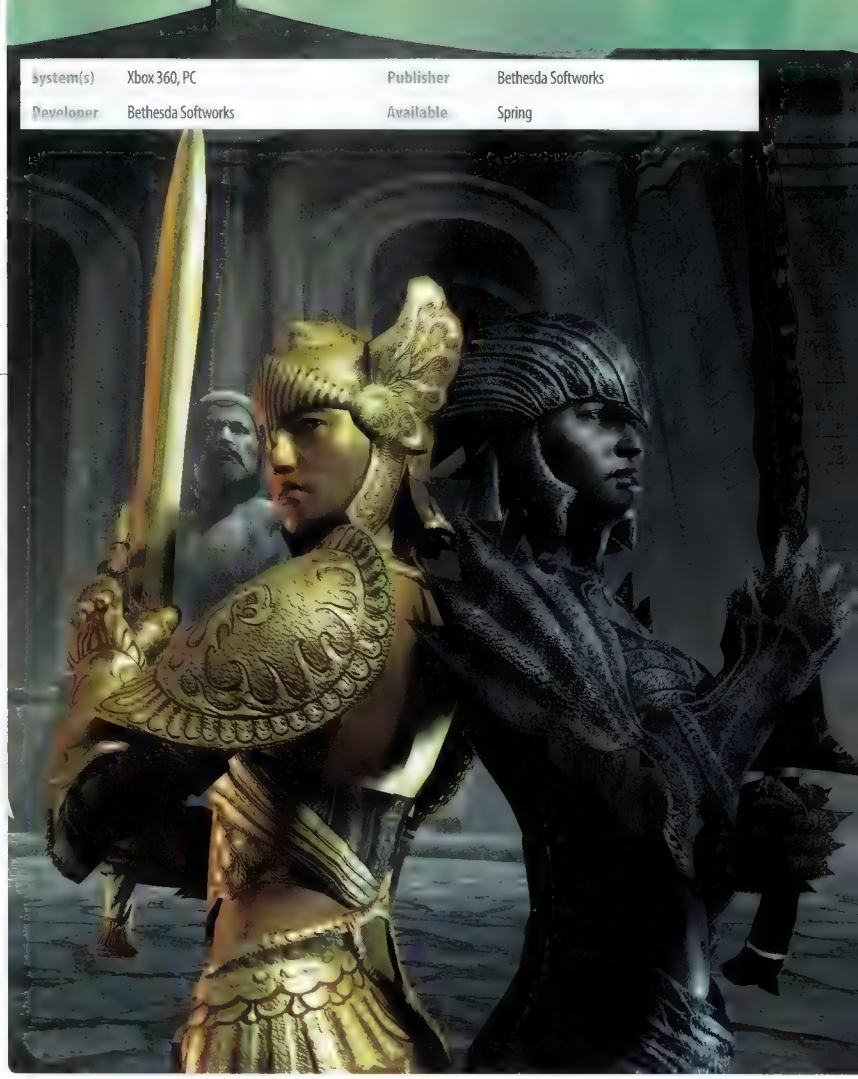
The Elder Scrolls IV
Shivering Isles

Isle of Man, oh, man...

words **Greg Orlando**

System(s)	Xbox 360, PC	Publisher	Bethesda Softworks
Developer	Bethesda Softworks	Available	Spring



Bethesda Softworks did the unimaginable when it made Oblivion a much sought-after destination. The company's Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion proved not only to be a tremendous, action-based role-playing game for Xbox 360 and PC, but also a 2006 game of the year contender—to say nothing of its standing among the best RPGs ever released.

Now, Oblivion will become an even more delectable place to visit. Bethesda is augmenting the game with the Shivering Isles expansion, which will add roughly 30 hours of gameplay; a brand-new story; a series of new island-themed environments to explore; and host of new quests, weapons, and armors for adventurers. Shivering Isles will be released for both Xbox 360 and PCs but, as an interesting aside, only PC players will be able to get the game from a physical, brick-and-mortar store. Xbox Live serves as the distribution medium for Shivering Isles' Xbox 360 version, marking the first time a game company has included what could be a considered a full game in itself over the online service.

Bethesda has stated the Shivering Isles is, physically, one-quarter of the size of Cyrodiil, the setting for The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion. The Isles will be their own entity, separate from the planes of Oblivion, ruled over by a Daedric prince. This time around, the prince in question is Sheogorath, the prince of madness. Sheogorath's beloved islands are disintegrating, and the game has the mad ruler seeking out the player to discover the cause of the turmoil and charging him with the destruction of its source.

Given the Isles' ruler and his inclinations, the expansion emphasizes twisted environments and humor to match. Beyond its contorted trees and dungeons existing amid the tangle of their roots, Isles also offers opportunities for black comedy; one quest requires players to be creative in the way they dispatch a series of adventurers that Sheogorath has already marked for death. Although it will be possible to be pedestrian in the matter of whacking the targets in question, that would seem to defeat the point. The Isles, after all, are a place of madness...

Shivering Isles will keep its roots, bent and gnarled though they may be, firmly in Oblivion's mythos. Players can opt to continue using their character in Oblivion in Shivering Isles, and may take their adventurer back and forth between the games at will. It will also be possible to use a wholly new hero in Shivering Isles, although this requires starting a new game of Oblivion which, considering, is not a wholly unpalatable idea. **play**

"...the Shivering Isles is, physically, one-quarter of the size of Cyrodiil..."

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System(s) PlayStation 2 | Publisher Namco Bandai Games America
Developer BEC | Available March 15, 2007

Eureka Seven
Vol. 2 The New Vision

Heather Campbell

Eureka Seven: New Vision continues the original storyline of the first Eureka game, New Wave. It's a game for fans, certainly. Opening with a series of sepia-toned, nostaligic flashbacks of characters I know nothing about, New Vision doesn't try to induct non-fans into its world. It's like having amnesia, except you've got to get back to work right away.

The anime intro to the game is stellar, and looks to be taken right out of the series. It's a shame then, that like the Fullmetal Alchemist games for the PS2, Eureka 7 vol. 2 (New Vision) is so far ugly and stiff. Characters sometimes stare into space when talking to each other, and the voice-acting, while energetic, doesn't seem to match the physicality or the bland facial expressions of the characters in question. And with so many cut scenes, it's a bit like watching an anime … that was drawn in the fewest polygons possible. There's time before the game is released, so perhaps developers are going to put a new coat of paint on the game. It's a shame that the game isn't cel-shaded, to match the look of the intro, and the series as a whole.

When you finally do get a chance to *play* the game, as opposed to watching lengthy in-game cut-scenes, the control is loose and awkward. Air-boarding, aka "lifting," is such a great concept, but instead of playing like Wave Race in the sky, it's more like the worst levels in Pod Racer. As of right now, the game doesn't get any tighter when mechs are introduced; despite the variety of weapons and fighting techniques, controls are sloppy and wild.

Now, I see no reason to go easy on this game just because it ties in with a popular anime. If one went to the movies, and the poorly shot acting of the characters didn't sinc up with the dialogue, you'd demand your money back. Or, if you went to play soccer with some friends, and instead of kicking, you stood around *talking* about soccer, you'd probably think back on the match as disappointing.

Then again, this is a little like sneaking into the lot while the movie is being made; there's the potential for a good game here, if the direction gels while there's still time. Hopefully, the makers of E7:NV will take the opportunity to make a compelling title out of the foundation that's been laid. I hope they get the chance to rework the music, while they're at it. Maybe the midi tunes are fun for fans of the show, but for the rest of us, they're pretty grating. **play**

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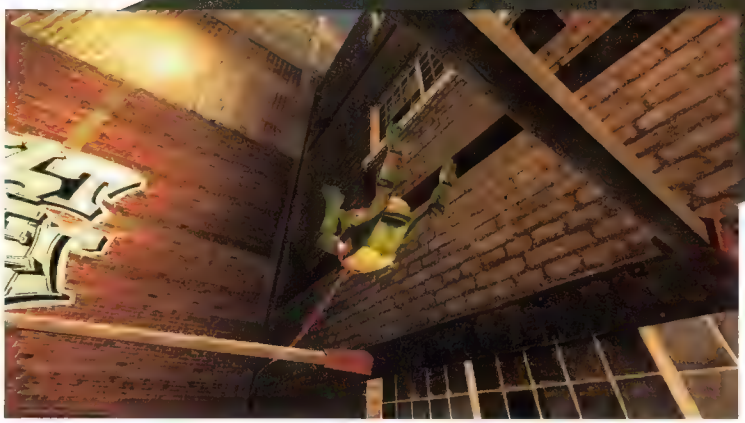
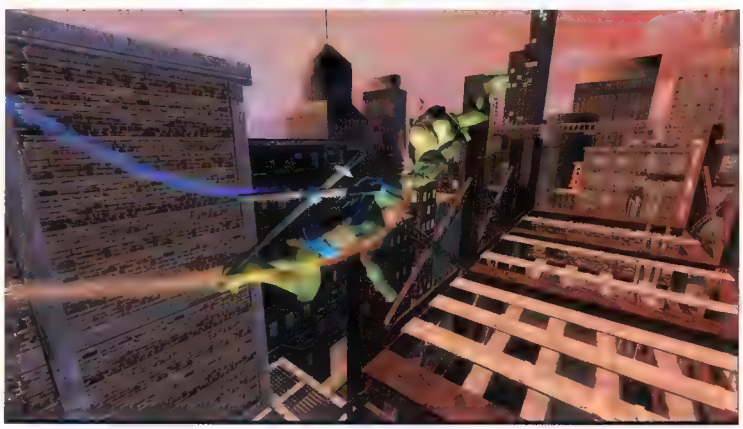
System(s)	PS2, Xbox 360 (shown)	Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Ubisoft Montreal	Available	March

Shella good?

Dave Halverson





Feast your eyes on the first print screens of TMNT for the Xbox 360. You were expecting normal mapping? Well, let's just say that when you see it move, along with the added effects and 60 fps, you will not be disappointed.

Based on the upcoming—and mind blowing, take my word for it—film from Warner Bros. and Imagi, TMNT is the turtles action game that fans have been hoping for since the heroes in a half shell crawled out of the ooze. Not that Konami didn't develop a few prime beat-'em-ups back in the day, but this time around the gameplay and character design is all new and aimed squarely at the boy's athleticism and Ninjitsu.

The game plays like a flowing platformer, only how you play actually resonates with your fellow turtles, so the better you look, the more assistance they'll provide. This not only comes in handy when you need a mid-air boost to cross an impassable chasm but also in the games awesome melee exchanges, where different combinations of turtles result in specific moves that make taking down the games foot clan hordes and larger monsters a whole lot easier than going solo. Also, unlike other TMNT games, this one is single-player focused. The two-player element comes into play but is controlled by the player. This makes for a much better and much more focused overall game. Multiplayer platforming could get messy otherwise. Trust me… you're gonna love it. Your friends can watch or better yet, get their own.

The mid-air buddy system in action.

"The game plays like a flowing platformer, only how you play actually resonates with your fellow turtles."

Leonardo, Donatello, Michelangelo, and Raphael may have taken separate paths since last we met, but the glue that holds them together, Master Splinter, and their strong family bond, win the day. Expect greatness from Montreal Studios and Imagi on this one. The turtles are back and better than ever on the screen and in the game. Here we go again! **play**

PlayStation 3	TBD
Pandemic	March

Mercenaries 2
World in Flames

words Greg Orlando

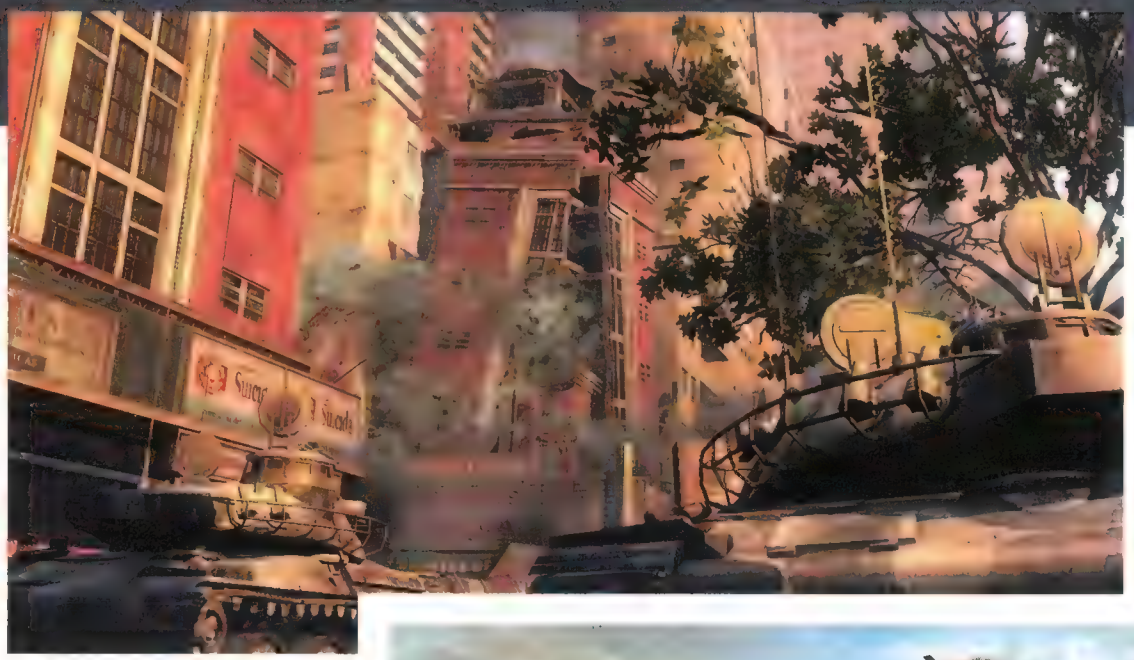
There's a disclaimer on the Mercenaries 2: World in Flames Web site. It reads, disconcertingly, "[Pandemic Studios] has never been contacted by any U.S. government agency concerning the development of Mercenaries 2." The game's senior producer Jonathan Zamkoff writes this off as a mere clarification.

But this is perhaps an oversimplification of the matter. News agencies such as the Associated Press and the British Broadcasting Corporation noted the Venezuelan government recently took issue with Pandemic and its third-person adventure World in Flames. No wonder; the game is set in Venezuela and its stated goal is to overthrow, as its Web site notes, "A power-hungry tyrant [who] messes with Venezuela's oil supply, sparking an invasion that turns the country into a warzone."

A Venezuelan congressman, Israel Garcia, went so far as to tell the BBC the game was a preparation for a real U.S. invasion of his country. "I think the US government knows how to prepare campaigns of psychological terror so they can make things happen later," he said.

The fire has been lit, and Pandemic Studios plans to let it burn with Mercenaries 2.

This time, wanton destruction moves to the next generation, specifically, the PlayStation 3 and, most likely, the Xbox



360 as well. Mercenaries 2 continues the plight with mohawked Swede Matthias Nilsson and his pals joined by a mysterious fourth gun-for-hire in an adventure set in oil-rich Venezuela. As one of these mercenaries (or a pair of them in two-player cooperative play), would-be gunslingers will get to drive vehicles, perform missions for various warring factions, and engage in wanton destruction for cold, hard cash.

Once again, players will have access to a host of weapons such as rifles, shoulder-launched rockets, and plastic explosives that they can use to destroy just about anything they see. Only this time, on the PlayStation 3, the destruction will be greater and more graphically pleasing than ever.

"In truth, let me say that Mercenaries always wanted to be a next-gen game," the game's director Cameron Brown said. "The PlayStation 2 and Xbox are great consoles, but there was so much more we wanted to do but just didn't have the power. So it's really exciting to be making a next-gen Mercenaries game. There's actually plenty of stuff that goes in the 'we couldn't do this last-gen' category, but let me mention just one: Fire. The concept of playing with fire is something that we've been talking about a lot. We think we've found a way to make fire really fun for the player—something that takes it beyond its usual role of cool graphical effect and into the realm of an interesting toy to get creative with. Until now, fire has been a very scary thing to work with in games, since it's such a fluid, organic substance. On the PlayStation 3, we have the processing power we need to model it."

Fire only highlights a long list of graphical effects made possible by the PlayStation3, Brown says. "We're expanding inwards by increasing the detail of everything in the game. Vehicles have landing gear, weak points, panels that crumple and can fall off, and just a whole crapload of articulated parts. Buildings can be destroyed in an enormous variety of ways —we handle damage from collapsing an entire skyscraper, to knocking down half a house, to showing individual bullet holes with depth—it looks like you can put your finger in them," he says.

This graphical power and freeform destruction sometimes surprises even the men and women who designed it. "In a gameplay sense," Zamkoff says, "due to the nature of the open-world design we get half a dozen chuckles a day from some very cool explosion, funny artificial intelligence behavior, or great physics simulation in the world. I just saw our director blow the turret off a tank with a mound of C4. The turret flew into traffic and destroyed a civilian moving van in a massive explosion." In the wholly unscripted world of Mercenaries 2, players can expect lots of these cool, offbeat, and comically violent moments.

There will also be generous improvements to the game's A.I. and its faction systems, the developers note. "Each group's soldiers can have very different behavior based on the personality and style of that group. For example, we want the guerillas to be very 'ambushy,'" Brown says. "They'll lie in wait, really dig in behind cover, and make you work to drive them out into the open. Another group—I don't want to name names just yet—is much more reckless, and you'll find them out in the open, charging you and hoping to overwhelm you a lot more often. We've also greatly improved the ability of the AI to make and change its plans during the course of an engagement. Our goal is to make A.I. that feels human in relevant ways. For example, a designer can assign an A.I. unit to guard a vehicle. When you come to steal that vehicle, it has a lot of ways it can respond. It might try and shoot you. It might summon help. It might realize that the best way to protect the vehicle is to get in it and drive it somewhere else."

Venezuela should be feeling the heat sometime in March. **play**

"The fire has been lit, and Pandemic Studios plans to let it burn with Mercenaries 2."

Tank you very much.

System(s)	Various	Publisher	Midway
Developer	Assorted	Available	2007

Midway 2007 Preview

An overhaul here, a new IP there; it's all systems go at Midway

words Brady Fiechter

Ed Boon, co-creator of the Mortal Kombat franchise, says even your Grandma will be throwing spears and ripping out spines with his latest in the humorously gruesome fighting series. Now why would he say such a thing? Obviously, because Mortal Kombat is coming to Wii, and everyone plays Wii, and pulling off fatalities with various motions of the Wii remote is a snap. Or at least it appeared to be as Boon demoed his creation on a giant screen at the Hard Rock Hotel in Las Vegas.

Boon was just one in a group of gamemakers on hand to show off Midway's 2007 games lineup. Amongst the several games on display and my personal most-wanted of the bunch was BlackSite: Area 51, the sequel to Area 51 that appears to be dramatically different in look and feel from the original. The game will maintain a fast-paced shooter sensibility, but this time out a squad follows your commands as you exterminate aliens around the rural exteriors and industrial interiors of Area 51. The first level I played looked very promising.

A teaser level was also on display for the hyped action shooter John Woo Presents: Stranglehold. In the museum section of the game, I came away with the understanding that this is a game where many, many people die, the level gets ripped to shreds in the process, and many, many more people die while you perform acrobatic moves and constantly interact with sections of the level. I want more.

Originally only announced for PC and PS3, Unreal Tournament 2007, now named Unreal Tournament III, had been promised for a showing on Xbox 360. And it is, of course, a graphical powerhouse, riding on the Unreal Engine 3 technology.

Also being pushed by the Unreal Engine 3 is a World War II shooter called Hour of Victory. Moving through select battlefields from the European and North African fronts, you'll be routinely alternating between three characters: a British commando, who takes the more aggressive approach to battle, dumping ammunition with impunity and rushing situations with brawn more than brains; a US ranger, who picks the enemy off with the careful eye of his sniping rifle; and the wait-in-the shadows US operative, who specializes in quiet infiltration with his silencer and knife.

While no gameplay footage was shown, Midway unveiled Vin Diesel's The Wheelman, based on his upcoming movie and featuring a mix of car combat and on-foot shootouts. A CG trailer means diddly squat, but I gotta give props to whoever made the outrageous car chase scene undeniably exciting.

A few more games were shown, mostly for PC and handheld, so look for coverage in future issues.

WHIP IT!
The new way to decapitate.

play

Staff "Round-up"

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Reviews

March 2007

Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, 2D action , racing, RPGs, and open-world
Now playing: Bullet Witch, Motor Storm, Kameo , Voodoo Vince, Crackdown
Most wanted Virtual Console game: 3-way tie: Sin & Punisment, Mischief Makers, or Battletoads in Battlemaniacs. I cheated.

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

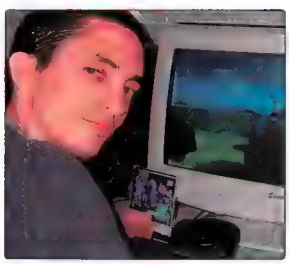
Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: Hotel Dusk Room 215, Zelda: Twilight Princess
Most wanted Virtual Console game: Super Metroid

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

Greg Orlando
Senior Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Crackdown, Gears of War
Most wanted Virtual Console game: Tecmo Bowl

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: Infernal, Vanguard, Battlefield 2142
Most wanted VC game: Bomberman

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Motor Storm p. 058

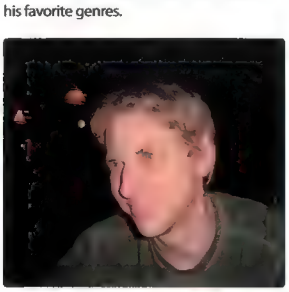
The play rating system

10...Perfect
9...Extraordinary
8...Great
7...Good
6...Decent
5...Average
4...Below average
3...Poor
2...Bad
1...Terrible

Nick Des Barres
Japan Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, Action, Fighting
Now playing: Virtua Fighter 5, Hotel Dusk: Room 215
Most wanted Virtual Console game: Rygar

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.



Casey Loe
Contributing Editor

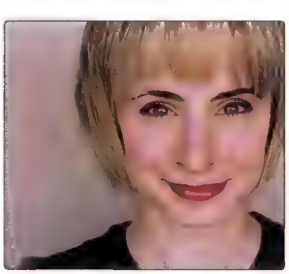
Favorite genres: RPGs, action, hummingbird simulators
Now playing: Portrait of Ruin, Gears of War
Most wanted VC game: Revenge of Shinobi

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Eric Patterson
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: Survival Horror, puzzle, music + Bemani, 2D SNK fighters
Now playing: WoW: Burning Crusade, Valhalla Knights
Most wanted Virtual Console game: Herzog Zwei

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?



Heather Campbell
Associate Editor

Favorite genres: Fighting, RPGs, Action, Etc.
Now playing: VF5, Guitar Hero 2
Most wanted Virtual Console game: LoZ: A Link to the Past

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.

Mike Hobbs
Art Director

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Zelda, Resistance, RR7
Most wanted Virtual Console game: Sin & Punisment

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	Sega	Available	February 20
Developer	AM2	Online Mode	NA	ESRB Rating	Teen

Virtua Fighter 5

Virtually unchallenged

words **Heather Campbell**

Virtua Fighter was the game that made me buy a 32X. I loved the game so much that even as a line formed at the Mortal Kombat cabinet next to it, I played through the first mainstream polygon brawler with academic focus. Virtua Fighter was addictive . . . but confounding. Here was a slow, bloodless, primary-colored fighting game audacious enough to take up floor space as arcades were drying up after the Street Fighter 2 boom. VF had very few characters, weird hairstyles, and everyone jumped way too high. And they spoke noisy, muddled Japanese.

But there was a part of me that saw a compelling vision beyond the limitations of mid-late-nineties graphics boards. And I think Virtua Fighter 5 was the game that the AM2 development team was dreaming of when they created Virtua Fighter. More than any other Virtua Fighter I've played, this one feels like a stripped down, fighting simulator, the way that VF1 felt when compared to the clunky, flashy competitors of its time.

For those of you concerned, there are no staggered play fields and there remains no fourth button. What does return is the same surgical attention to detail that made VF4 so sharp.

Virtua Fighter 5 has 17 fighters, two of which are new. Rendered on the PS3, each character falls so close to the uncanny valley that sometimes it feels like you're fighting with human corpses. As the characters near reality, their awkward pre-bout phrases become more absurd. Seeing a cartoon yell, "You'd Better Take Me Seriously!" is very different from hearing it shouted by a nearly photo-realistic youngster.

In addition to the standard arcade-and-vs.-mode offerings, VF5 has a quest-mode, where players can recreate the feeling of traveling to different arcades (albeit, Japanese ones), to challenge local heroes. Retaining the variable A.I. from VF4, each virtual player uses his fighter differently, meaning the Eileen you face in one arcade is not going to be the same across town.

Furthermore, there's a training dojo that lets you mark your moves with a frame counter. A frame counter! Why? Well, it's included for the truly obsessive-compulsive VF addict, to allow perfectly timed reversals and throws. Train at this dojo, and your bouts at the arcade are certain to improve … but then again, so are your rivals'. **play**

Would you hurry up! My feet are freezing!

Virtua Fighter 5

score 9.5

Rocket is here!

Available now everywhere magazines are sold!

System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	Microsoft	Available	Now
Developer	Realtime Worlds	Online/Multi	2-player cooperative	ESRB Rating	M

CRACKDOWN

Judge, jury and executioner

Greg Orlando

As an agent of law enforcement in Crackdown, you might be inclined to, say, arrest criminals and read them their rights so they may be given due process. However, Crackdown doesn't supply you with an arrest button, and the only right a gang member has here is the right to disappear after his corpse has been on the ground for three or so seconds.

Crackdown follows in the footsteps of Grand Theft Auto, Saints Row, and other third-person open-world adventures. This time, however, the protagonist is, ostensibly, a force for good and, moreover, he's imbued with superhuman abilities that improve over the course of the game. It's a nice change, to be sure, and developer Realtime Worlds does some neat things to distinguish Crackdown from the rabble.

With Crackdown, the open world truly opens up. As the hero collects agility orbs, his ability to leap increases dramatically. This gives him access to more and more platforms and rooftops, which provide not only scenic vistas and strategic points from which to wreak havoc on the enemy, but more and more orbs. Soon, it's possible to leap vertically in excess of 20 feet or make huge, distance-chewing running jumps. Tall buildings and skyscrapers quickly become accessible, and running jumps become a fine primary means of transportation.

More to the point, Crackdown's leaping is just plain thrilling. There's something indescribably wonderful about making an epic leap from the top of a huge building, soaring breathlessly across the sky with the hero's arms flailing wildly before crashing down on a rooftop that seems hundreds of feet away. The whole game becomes a jumping puzzle, but without the frustration; given the hero's leaping ability, there's simply no point that can't be reached, and no powerup that's seemingly impossible placed.

Driving seems like a pointless endeavor in Crackdown, even with special police

"There's something indescribably wonderful about making an epic leap from the top of a huge building..."

cars that can be powered up to destroy enemy vehicles on contact. Jumping is more fun, offers more opportunity for creativity and pleasant views (staring at the skyline from rooftops is a fairly awesome proposition here), and lets players defeat formerly impassable environmental terrors such as rock cliffs.

Sadly, the rest of the game proves less flashy and more by-the-numbers. It's highly competent and suitably adrenaline-fueled, but sort of pales in comparison to its Spider-Man-esque bits. You're given access to a huge city carved into three distinct chunks ruled over by warring gangs. The goal here is to locate the sub-bosses, murder them, and move on. Kill enough sub-bosses, and it's easier to take down the gang's leader.

A lock-on mechanism allows you to target and whack foes easily. Kicking foes or beating them down with a gun increases an agent's strength to the point where one hit will do what 10 or so bullets does. In time, an agent will be able to lift cars and hurl them, but it's a lot easier to simply run around kicking everything in sight.

Boss battles allow for more creativity. You're encouraged to find alternate routes of entry to avoid the seemingly unending swarm of drones in order to get to the big cheese. And the game certainly allows for plenty of run-and-gun catharsis punctuated by lots of exploding crates and the like; gang leaders, surprisingly, decorate their houses and lairs with high explosives.

As the game notes over and over again, more kills equals more skills ("Skills for kills, agent! Skills for kills!" the agent's overseer screams), so violence is definitely rewarded. But diminishing returns, means the additional strength and targeting ability don't mean too much. And even the joy of wholesale slaughter is somewhat diminished by the fact that most sub- and boss battles feature respawning enemies to keep the tension level high.

Crackdown's cooperative play adds greatly to the title's quality, with two agents able to dole out harsh justice aplenty. This is the way law enforcement, at least the crazy ultra-violent law enforcement this game promotes, makes a better future for us all. **play**

Crackdown

score 8.5

He deserves whatever he gets for wearing that shirt.

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	2K Games	Available	February
Developer	Climax	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	T

Ghost Rider

Hey, your heads on fire

words **Dave Halverson**

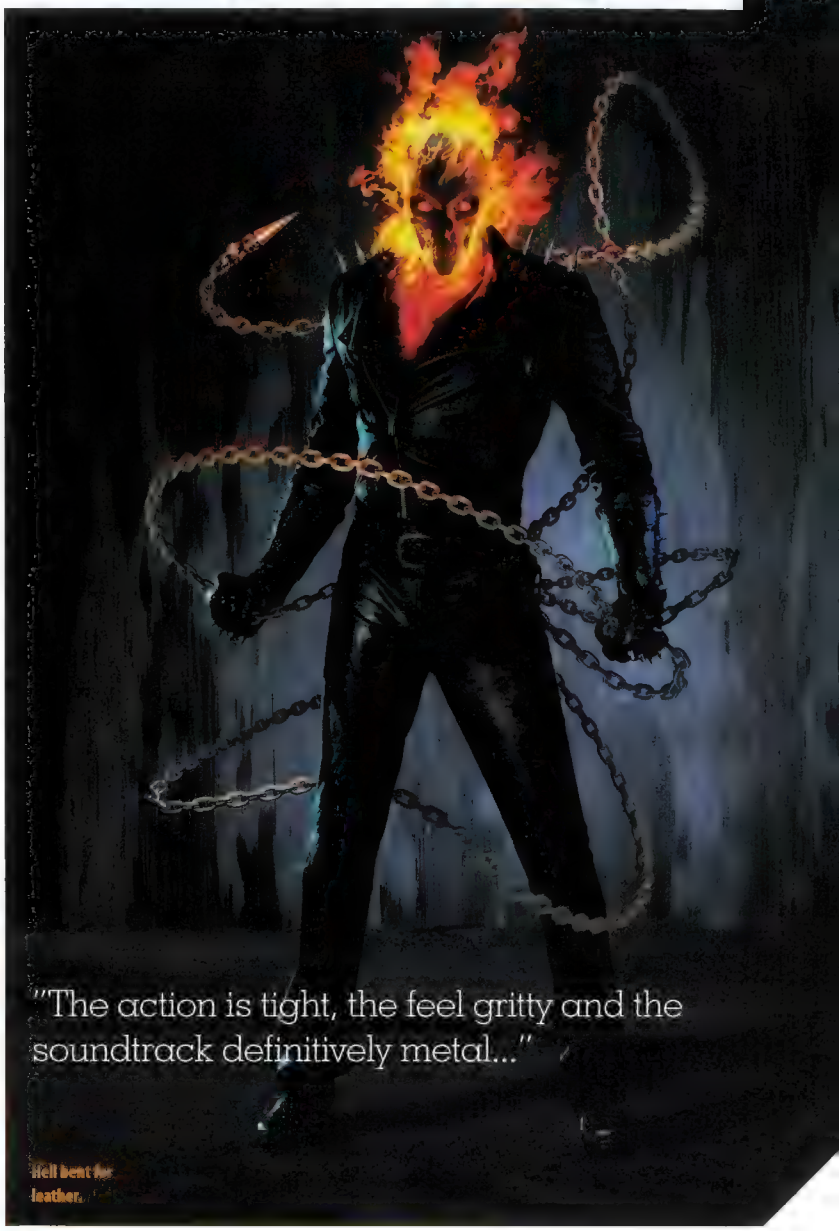
I'm rooting for Ghost Rider. When it comes to men in tights the media gets all dewy eyed, followed by the usual dose of touchy feel hero drivel...but drudge up a biker from hell and all I hear is whining.

Sorry to be the bearer of bad news but Superman has crashed and burned more times than I care to remember, but Ghost Rider, at least on the gaming grid, is pretty hot stuff.

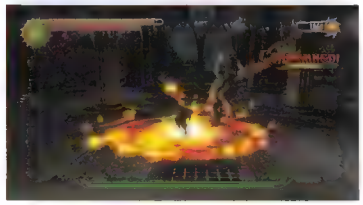
The set up is familiar enough: super-charged melee action interrupted by the occasional chopper duel, but the execution is exceptional.

Demons have escaped to the surface world, violating Satan's pact with heaven's angels. If he can't control his kingdom, then Hell becomes the property of heaven, and the devil doesn't want to move, so he sends his human lighter in to seal the rift.

Based on the comic (although Sam Elliot delivers the menus and narration), Ghost Rider gives a whole new meaning to the phrase "chain combo." Battling your way out of hell through the game's initial missions, the Rider deals with demon hordes via his chain whip and firearm, whipping demons into submission and then hitting circle to pile drive them into dust. Building up rage by soaking in their essence, once the gauge is full he can unleash hells fury—a devastating rage attack that can be focused or generously distributed. Afterwards points can be spent purchasing fire, light, and heavy combos or raising energy levels. Elsewhere button prompts trigger mini-events, and nuances abound. Demons with "brutal" spheres around them, for instance, can only be killed by delivering sustained combos, building from Damned, to Condemned, and finally Brutal. Get hit while delivering the pain and its back to Damned you go. Mastering combos is key if you want to survive, as are jumping maneuvers and defensive moves. The Rider also packs a mean charge and dashing punch making him an overall nimble, fun-to-control anti-hero.



The chopper bits are where the game truly shines though—a combination of riding, shooting, jumping and laying the bike down to pass under gaps. Climax does a great job evolving the game on the whole, but the chopper bits are exceptional; definitely the game's cooler moments.



I'd love to have seen more platforming and adventure similar to God of War, but Ghost Rider gets the job done as a quality action game that does the brand complete justice.

The action is tight, the feel gritty and the soundtrack definitively metal, supported by rousing comic book intermissions that pulse with color. It's not mind blowing, but it's certainly better than 90% of the comic book fodder out there. So, go to hell. **play**

Ghost Rider

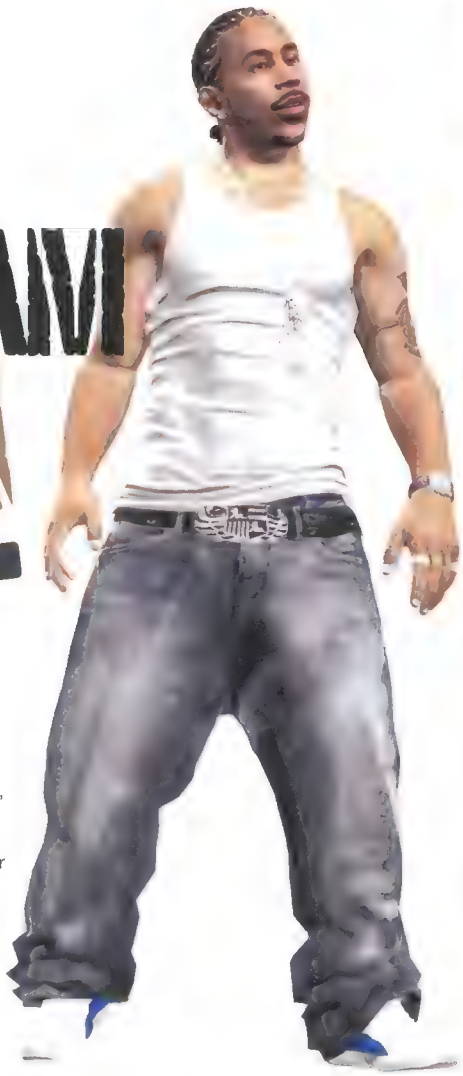
score 7.5

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360	Publisher	Electronic Arts	Available	Now
Developer	Electronic Arts	Online Play	1-2	ESRB Rating	M

DEF JAM ICON

F- Da Security, Indeed

words **Greg Orlando**



This is a new Def Jam for a new series of game consoles. Gone are any vestiges of Jam's wrestling past; developer Aki, responsible for previous games in the series, has been sent packing. Icon is all Electronic Arts' doing. For better or for worse.

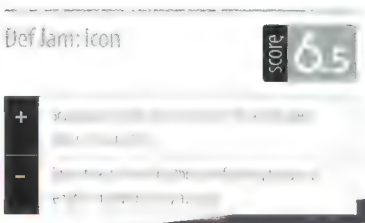
Icon has morphed fully into a 3D brawler, and a gorgeous one at that. In the game's nightclub venue, the fighters initially appear to be rendered in black-and-white. It turns out, the lighting here casts a halo of light on the participants, making them seem bathed in a heavenly glow. The rest of the items, in contrast, are so muted as to appear devoid of color. It's one of the most oddly beautiful scenes to be rendered in a video game.

The change to a full-on fighter does not come without its sticking points, however. Although the combatants' movements are, on the whole, smooth, there's also an unavoidable bit of jerkiness when characters grab one another. Characters move slowly, methodically, here; this makes it easy to notice the little hitches. The developers have also largely done away with holds and submissions, opting instead to put the emphasis on punches, kicks, weapon usage, and throws. Button mashing for great results is decidedly easier here than it has been in previous Def Jams.

A music-based system proves to be equal parts boon and bad idea. Players each choose their own piece of music to take into battle, and this tune can be used to influence a fight's momentum. A music track can be "scratched" to trigger in-game effects such as water pulses, falling objects, arcs of electricity, or flames. A fighter has an advantage when his music is playing, and competitors will have to battle on that particular level, too. Extra damage is done if a fighter hits another at the exact moment of a beat (beat on the beat, that is), so players are not only encouraged to hammer their opponents, but to do so in time to the music.

It's a novel system, but ultimately far too mechanistic to be anything but a gimmick. Pulsing flames tuned perfectly to a song's beats comes straight out of Compton's Worst Music Videos. Making players time their attacks in tune with Fat Joe's "Make it Rain" is perhaps the high-water mark of silliness unintentionally inserted into a serious video game. In short, there's no way to imagine these fights as anything but someone's absurd rap fantasy that was somehow shoehorned onto a fighting game.

In truth, it might be less obtrusive if the game's fighters just whipped out vinyl records and started hucking them at one another. Jam that on the one. Word.



"...there's no way to imagine these fights as anything but someone's absurd rap fantasy..."

[illegible]	PlayStation 2	[illegible]	Sega	[illegible]	March 20
[illegible]	Neverland Company	[illegible]	NA	[illegible]	Teen

Shining Force EXA

More Neo than ever

words **Heather Campbell**

From a cliché cast of anime characters, to simple hack-n-slash action, and laborious dialogue boxes with bad dubbing, Shining Force EXA is the kind of game we've seen before. I'm not just talking about Shining Force NEO. We've all played Japanese Diablo clones. And though certain visuals in the game are grand, EXA doesn't testify to the true strengths of the PS2 as the system begins its decline towards obsolescence.

So let's discuss then, dear reader, why I enjoy this game so much.

Because I do. I loved playing Shining Force EXA. And investigating why will be as much a deconstruction of the title as it will be an analysis of what I look for in video games.

Gaming doesn't always have to be astonishing. Like another late PS2 game, Rogue Galaxy, Shining Force does one thing, and does it well. It may not be the epic adventure that, say, Twilight Princess is, nor does it offer some new twist on game theory, like Final Fantasy XII.

But sometimes gaming can just be mindless entertainment, as political critics are always hungry to point out. Games can alleviate stress; they can be escapes from the tension of the rest of your life. Shining Force offers small rewards every few moments, and satisfies through a sort of goal-oriented mediation. That's why EXA is good. There's just enough diversity, and just enough flashy weapons attacks to keep you hooked for a few hours while you unwind. Larger, more incredible games like Zelda or FFXII have a habit of leaving me anxious when I play. Shining Force, on the other hand, takes after Y's with a simple, rewarding adventure.

Following in the footsteps of Shining Force Neo, EXA inherits the frantic button-mashing action sure to disappoint those fans waiting for a return to Shining's strategy roots. Even with additions like weapons-specific combos, and multiple characters with branching storylines and maps, EXA can't hide what it is: waves of monsters that fill the screen, piling on your avatar until he's lost in the fray. And your job? Press X as much as possible, to throw them off. Sometimes you charge your weapon to unleash a blurry burst of attacks. Sometimes you heal. And sometimes you inch forward into an area you're not ready for, taking on one monster at a time till you're over-leveled. Most of the time, though, you're pressing X as fast as your thumb can allow.

> "Shining Force offers small rewards every few moments, and satisfies through a sort of goal-oriented mediation."

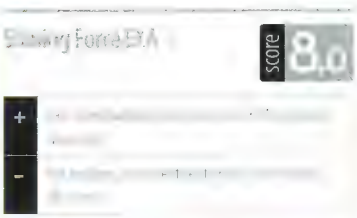
Which is fine, if the game has the right cadence. And the reason EXA is on my TV right now is because of its quality tempo. There's just enough monsters to keep me hooked, and just enough weapons to keep the visuals diverse. The rewards aren't just the moments where numbers pop up on screen and tell you *you've done something,* there are also several short and sweet rendered cut-scenes, delivered the way cinemas used to be—infrequently enough to be novel, and gorgeous enough to be a prize. I'd like to take a moment here to congratulate the artists behind these cut-scenes. The heroes are rendered in cel-shaded CG, like that found in Appleseed, but with variable outline thickness, as if sketched in true ink. It really does have a hand-drawn quality that I haven't seen in other cel-style CG. I took notice. I can't wait to see a whole game drawn like this.

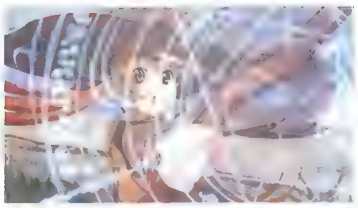
The story is fluff. Divided between two protagonists (Toma, the rambunctious tribal warrior, and Cyrille, the cool magician), the game unveils an epic tension between a nation of humans and of monsters. Constantly at war, these two countries will face the mobile

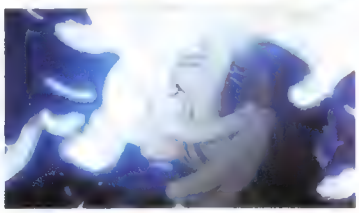
fortress called the Geo-Fortress, piloted by Toma, who seeks to end the conflict. It's traditional anime stuff, with dragons, robots, and flying airships. While the story is nice, it's not the focus of the game. It's the vague incentive for the endless fighting. As if you needed one.

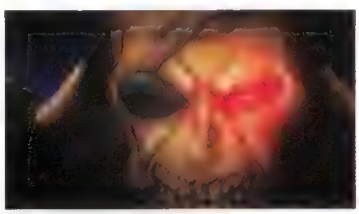
EXA is fast, which is sweet; moving from one area to another is not taxing. Toma runs like a little ninja, and his strike speed feels amped as well. Additionally, each weapon affects the way your characters look, which is a personal fancy of mine. I hate games where, upon purchasing a great set of scale armor, your avatar exits the store in the same sensational clothing he was wearing at the outset of the adventure. Toma and Cyrille have so many styles and combinations to choose from, that altering their wardrobes is as much a matter of stats as it is of fashion sense.

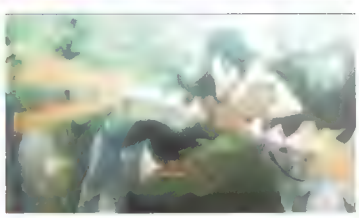
Shining Force EXA isn't going to be the definitive title in anyone's game library. But I'll bet it's a tried-and-true diversion on a lot of people's afternoon lists. I have a lot of games to play, writing reviews for this magazine. When I'm done with those, I'm going to take a break—by popping in EXA again. **play**











[illegible]	Xbox 360	[illegible]	Red Octane	[illegible]	March
[illegible]	Harmonix Music Systems	[illegible]	2-player co-op, Live content	ESRB Rating	T

Guitar Hero II

All the world's a stage

words Dave Halverson

When I was a teenager, I lost the tip of my left pinky finger from the joint up. Never mind the gory details, but I remember thinking how screwed I'd be if I ever took up the guitar. Now here I am decades later looking for a prosthetic fingertip so I can reach the blue and orange buttons on my plastic guitar. I've got a show to do!

There's something almost intimidating about Guitar Hero. Even though you're strapping on a video game guitar, it's an ax nevertheless—covered with stickers and appropriately personalized if you truly rock—and you want to deliver a command performance. Beginning your career at Nilbog High, it feels good to merely get through the set (audiences can be so cruel) but as that van or bus rolls on, city to city, venue to venue, it becomes more about the music and putting on a great show than just blowing through each 4-out-of-5 track set. Everybody who frequents the game knows the feeling, when the prompts melt away and you find yourself actually playing the music; that's why Guitar Hero is the best music and/or mainstream game to hit these United States.

> "Everybody who frequents the game knows the feeling, when the prompts melt away..."

Things are looking and sounding better than ever on Xbox 360 thanks to a complete HD graphics overhaul, including 3 new characters: rockabilly-greaser Eddie Knox, femme rocker Casey Lynch, and Scandinavian metal god Lars Umlaut, along with superior audio, and the brand-new Gibson replica X-plorer guitar made exclusively for the 360. Elsewhere GH II 360 features all of the upgrades found in the PS2 sequel. Co-op, face off, and the all-important practice mode—which frees you of the rock meter and allows you to slow the track down—are all in the show, along with easy, medium, and "holy crap!", okay hard, difficulty settings.

The venues look spectacular on 360. I hadn't quite reached the outdoor festival at Stonehenge, but I've seen enough to know that it's going to be a spectacular end to my world tour. My housemates tell me that the shows look awesome too, and judging by the intros, I assume they're telling it straight. I'm too busy

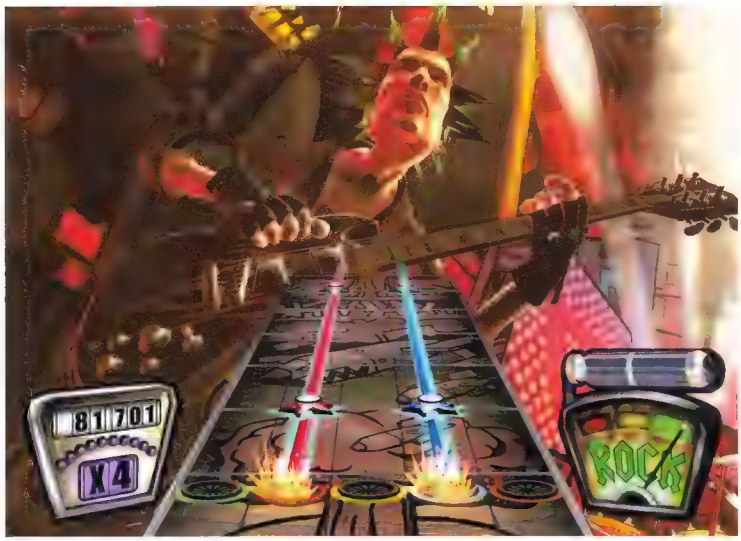
looking at the fret board. Maybe I should have handed over the guitar to have a look. Speaking of which, I'm pleased to announce that I've finally found a multiplayer game that I like… GH II's co-op mode is the most 2-player fun I've had since Dashin' Desperados.

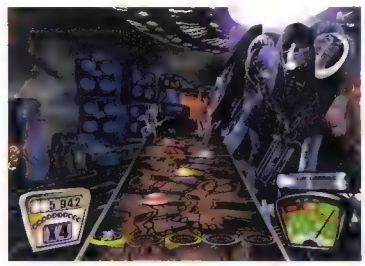
Tune-wise, seldom if ever did I find a venue where I didn't like two or three of the five selected tracks ("Hush" saves the day for The Red Octane). The inclusion of such '70s rawk as Alice Cooper's "Billion Dollar Babies" (one of 10 exclusive 360 tracks) and Kansas's "Carry on Wayward Son" (a super fun song to play) are adequate forgiveness for such audible poop as The Police. Ample head-banging lays in wait.

On the Live side, racking up achievement points allows you to download themes, picture packs, and new songs, and of course a leader board will proudly display gaming's top rockers. I can only think of three things I'd love to see for future sequels: a wah-wah pedal, cut-scenes on the bus, and a Live feature to download complete concerts. Imagine playing an entire Rush or Black Sabbath show alongside the exaggerated likes of Geddy or Ozzie… without the bat head appetizer of course. **play**

Guitar Hero II

score 9.5





360 ax

The new Xbox 360 X-plorer

System(s)	PlayStation 3	Publisher	SCEA	Available	March
Developer	Evolution Studios	Online/Multi	2-8 player multi-player	ESRB Rating	T

Motor Storm

Live in your new Cell

words Dave Halverson

interview

simon benson

Producer, MotorStorm

play: Honestly; it was hard for me to contain myself the first time I played Motor Storm. As someone with a racing background, a game this realistic has been a dream. I'll begin with the obvious question. How have you managed to make every other PS3 title pale by such a wide margin? And don't be modest—it's a fact.

Simon Benson: Thanks for the kind words – we really appreciate it. It all boils down to one really simple thing – finding and hiring extremely talented and dedicated people. We have a mix here of really passionate young guys who want to make a difference, and unbelievably experienced veterans who have worked with Martin Kenwright for over 20 years on simulations, racing games and many other applications. It is all down to them that we were able to interrogate the hardware so fully.

Something else that helps is our approach, we tend not to look at the competition to establish our quality bar, we look at the real world instead. It's not our goal just to make the best game compared to the competition, as sometimes that doesn't push us hard enough. One saying we use internally is, "It's much better to aim for the stars... if you only manage to get as far as Venus, you're still loads better than everyone else who only got to the moon..."

Let's talk about real-time track deformation—the art of actually cutting a groove through pristine mud for instance. How on earth do you calculate this for every vehicle on every given track? Was this a major challenge and is this the sort of thing the PS3's cell processing makes possible?

You've nailed it – this is something only the CELL can do, and we waited years for the hardware to be able to do it. At a simple level, it happens because the techniques we use to make them look great are so streamlined that we can focus on making them feel right, i.e. through physics.

It's not just the vehicles wheels that deform the mud, we also deform it with any bits that are flying around (scenery, vehicle parts, etc.), even the riders deform the mud, I've even seen cases where a truck has driven over a fallen rider and 'cookie cut' his shape into the ground – nice.

Believe it or not, the deformation isn't our most complicated use of the mud; it's actually the kick-up. Every bit of mud that

is torn from the ground can be splattered on the vehicles in real time. This is where the power of the CELL really comes into play. With all of those vehicles kicking up all of that mud and then checking to see if each of those little mud splats hits any part of any other vehicle is a REALLY mammoth mathematical task – welcome to the world of CELL.

So this engine...proprietary?
It's our own, but we did use a few carefully selected middleware partners such as Havok for the physics and animation. It doesn't have a fancy name, we're a blunt Northern English developer and don't bother with that kind of rubbish.

You've made the courses the star of the game as much as the bikes, cars, and trucks by making them so wide and strategic. The lay of the terrain is uncannily real as are the lines and the way each vehicle reacts to different paths. The give and take/balance is unfathomable. Was balancing this game an overwhelming task?
At Evolution we say, "don't bring problems, bring solutions," and this ethos drove the vehicle balance project right through to completion. At times the challenge we knew we faced was unbelievably daunting, but I think our design team, working closely with coders and artists, really wanted to tackle a problem like this, as they felt it was a chance to be groundbreaking.

You must have done a ton of research designing each venue. Care to elaborate?
Our approach was, "it's a next-gen game so let's do next gen reference gathering." We took a helicopter-mounted high definition camera into Monument Valley using expertise and equipment from the very best action movies and recorded over 14 hours of 1080p footage for the team to use as their basis. This stuff is still fairly unprecedented, to a resolution never seen before. We also contacted real off-road racing experts and quizzed them about how the race should feel in each vehicle. We've built a lot of knowledge from traveling the world to make accurate recreations of rally events for our WRC series.

You're also dealing with a lot of off camber stuff...something no racer has ever really attempted. Did this pose much of a physics challenge?
Yes, especially in terms of AI. Again, the WRC days taught us a lot about camber but as soon as it applied to seven different classes of vehicle we were in new territory. Camber is vital in offering moment-to-moment gameplay that requires constant adjustment of the racing line and intense concentration to be rewarding.

The slow-motion crashes...Are these a product of Burnout's success or something you would have done either way? They're so much fun to watch given the complexity although they do take the game from simulation to fantasy racing. Was there any back and forth about their inclusion?
Initially we had included the slow mo feature to show off just how many bits we could throw around and what we could do with them (such as make every part deform the mud) and this went down so well in our E3 demo, that we built on it and exposed some of our development tools to the pause menu very late into the development of the game without much debate. With MotorStorm, simulation is important but entertainment trumps everything else. That's why the AI is trained to act like virtual gameplayers instead of virtual people.

There is one tiny nugget I'd like to see and that's more freedom to pitch the bikes more in the air—not do tricks (that's lame) but get into some heavy style in the air. Is this a possibility?
We gave it a lot of thought but in the end we felt that our gesture system was going to be so much fun as it was. We agree on tricks – some games make this the focus but we wanted pure brutal off-road racing.

Onto those crazy unlockable movies... are those in engine? Did someone actually model that terrain or is it HD video?
It's a combination of the HD capture mentioned above and some clever

"It all boils down to one really simple thing – finding and hiring extremely talented and dedicated people..."

~Simon Benson, Producer, Motor Storm

"comping" of CG, but in some cases it is pure gameplay footage, which you can see evolving in the unlocked videos. We knew we were onto something special when our own staff would walk past the capture suite and say, "Is that a photograph?"

We're talking Pixar quality. How did you manage to create so much extra content in so short a timeframe? And how? It looks like Discovery Channel.

We spared no cost in our reference gathering. We have a simulation and visualization expert who joined us from British Aerospace and his first job was to coordinate the reference trips – his work included negotiating with Hollywood talent, sourcing the very best camera equipment and preparing the trip with the Navajo nation.

Besides the inclusion of online is the Japanese version identical to the US version?

Both titles will definitely share many of the core gameplay elements throughout. Online is the major difference, and there are a number of other minor tweaks that we have included in the version that you'll be playing in the States.

A lot of developers say that the PS3 is an unruly beast. That to make it fire on all cylinders would cost so much and take so much man power that they couldn't recoup their costs. Yet here you (and hopefully Heavenly Sword) are. Is this a system that over time can be tamed? Is it as hard to work with as "they" say? No way the 360 could handle this, right?

This is a tough one. When "they" say it is difficult to work on, they often mean it in cynical, Sony-bashing terms. We agree that it was really tough to tame and required a big team but we approached this really positively, as it was a fun and testing challenge. None of the best games are easy to make, and if you shy away from risky challenges then you get mediocre games.

MotorStorm is only possible on PS3 and if you compare our first PS2 game to our last then you should be shaking at what might be achievable in the future!

No bashing here. Motor Storm is a major achievement, setting an off-road benchmark that seems unreachable. Can it get any better? Will you make a sequel?

...What about a straight Motocross game? Have you considered entering that arena? They need help... Or a 100% fantasy racer like Motor Toon... The possibilities are endless. You have the tools...you have the talent...

The only answer we can give is to your first question – can it get better? The answer is hopefully yes, as right now our focus is still MotorStorm and our plan to launch a range of additional content via download over the coming months, as well as supporting the online multiplayer experience.

Everything else must remain confidential for now, but we'd love to tell you because you say such nice things.

Well, I appreciate greatness.

Worth every last penny your PS3 was.

System(s)	Xbox 360 ,PS3 (PS3 Reviewed)	Publisher	Sega	Available	March
Developer	FROM Software	Online/Multi	1-8 players	ESRB Rating	T

Armored Core 4

Light up the sky

words **Dave Halverson**

If you've stuck with the Armored Core series this long, welcome to the next level of mechanized combat from FROM Software. You obviously relish this particular brand of robot action. If you're new to the series however, prepare yourself for a robotic assault that requires more than toggling weapons, aiming and shooting. This is no shooter; although sometimes I wish it was. I'd much rather partake in a continuous assault across vast cities and wilderness than micro-missions, but as missions go these are regal mechanoid skirmishes. Ranging in every conceivable way from terrain to target each chapter is more or less an exercise in militaristic warfare. Only through winning can you earn money, and only through the deft handling of your AC and its schematic, can you hope to prevail. This is a game for tinkerers, where what you purchase and equip is every bit as important as how well you play the game. You can play the last chapter of a given scenario at any time, but moving on without the proper mods is suicide: Time to hit the garage. If you've come to tinker, settle in.

Setting up the overall campaign we get an exceptional British voice actor (it's either Patrick Stewart or his clone) spewing the usual techno babble, none of which I care much about due to the nature of these games, sans any human interaction outside of the AC. As stories go, however, this one is highly detailed and well told. At the end of the day though, it's always the same. The bad guys are doing bad things and your guys want you to blow up their guys before they blow up you or, our guys. In other words, just show me where they are (sadly, this is never the case).

First you must acquire Schematics (such as GANO 1-Sunshine—whatever the hell that is), the design on which to rig your AC… Here's where AC fans should start drooling. Not only can you purchase parts to plug every hole with threads, but you can literally paint and decorate every piece of your robot. You want a Black body with purple highlights and yellow weapons? You got it…and it gets deeper and deeper as you go along. I spent more time tinkering than I did in most of the game's missions. It's apparent that this particular arm of FROM have spent a lifetime designing these things as you're confronted with every imaginable shape and size enemy… No way to possibly describe them all.

On the field—a diverse collection of indoor and outdoor assaults, some short and timed, some longer and not—the gameplay is smooth, the boost and hover control buttery and easy to manage, and the radar efficient. It's here, however, that the PS3's head scratching innards stick out like a sore thumb. The destruction, for instance, looks convincing enough, but the debris disappears through the tarmac. The effects are nice too, especially jetting on water, but the kind of detail you'd expect from the bowels of the PS3 are sorely lacking. We know the console can do better, but obviously only in the hands of the world's most elite developers. AC4 isn't an ugly game; it's just fairly blocky and superficial. I happen to really love normal mapping too and it's just not happening. We haven't received a 360 version to do a comparison, but since the PS3 was the lead platform I'm not so hopeful. Then again, FROM seems quite adept with the machine.

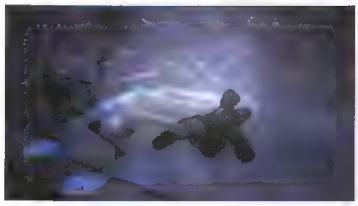
I highly recommend AC4 to series die-hards or anyone who likes a deeply strategic series of mission ops. If you're looking for an action/shooter however, you may want to wait until the system produces a good one. **play**

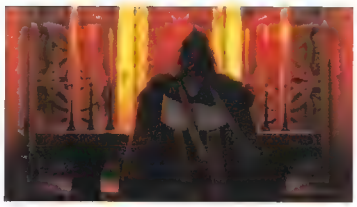
Armored Core 4

score 7.5

\+ Super deep customization, great voice work, diverse missions, great sound, [illegible]

– Short missions, simplistic level design





CASTLEVANIA
THE DRACULA X CHRONICLES

Yet another reason to dump your classic game collection on eBay *now*

System(s)	PSP	Publisher	Konami
Developer	Konami	Available	Summer 2007

words **Casey Loe**

One of the lost classics of gaming has finally found a home. Castlevania X: Rondo of Blood was among the PC Engine's best-loved and best-selling CD games, but never made the jump to the American TurboGrafx-16. Instead, we got a *different* Castlevania X (based on the Japanese Castlevania XX), a miserable Super NES port that was made by taking some Rondo of Blood assets and scattering them willy-nilly without any regard for level design or difficulty balance. But now American PSP owners will finally get a chance to play the real version of Rondo, the game that brought Castlevania into the modern age with voiced dialogue and a CD soundtrack, while preserving the tight level design, alternate paths, and multiple characters that made Castlevania III great.

But wait! There's *more*! In addition to the original Rondo of Blood, you get a new version of Rondo rendered in Ultimate Ghosts n'Goblins-style 2D/3D. And Konami isn't just prettying-up the visuals; they're promising a full "re-imagining" with new areas and improved gameplay. No clue yet as to what exactly these enhancements might include, but the drastically redesigned Richter Belmont has us hoping we'll see all the characters redone by quintessential Castlevania artist Ayami Kojima.

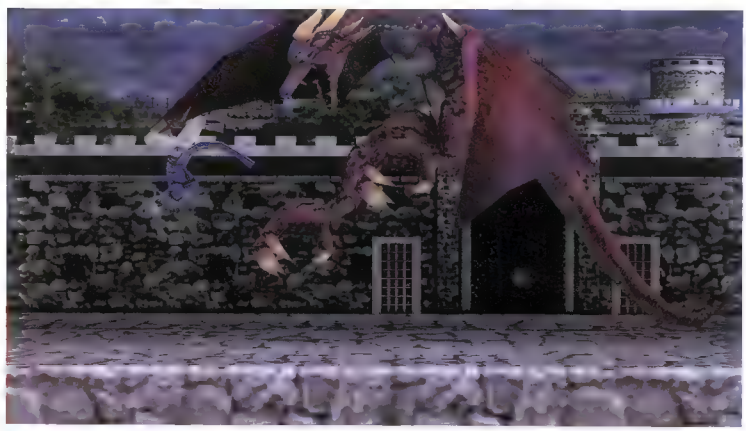
Still not enough? Well if you act *now* (or, you know, whenever) you'll also get the PlayStation classic Symphony of the Night, which was also an "X" title and is the direct storyline sequel to Rondo of Blood. Symphony hasn't been redone in 3D, but as with the original Rondo of Blood, Konami is promising that it's been "optimized" for the PSP. Let's hope his means that they're redrawing the levels for widescreen instead of simply slapping a black bar on one side of the screen.

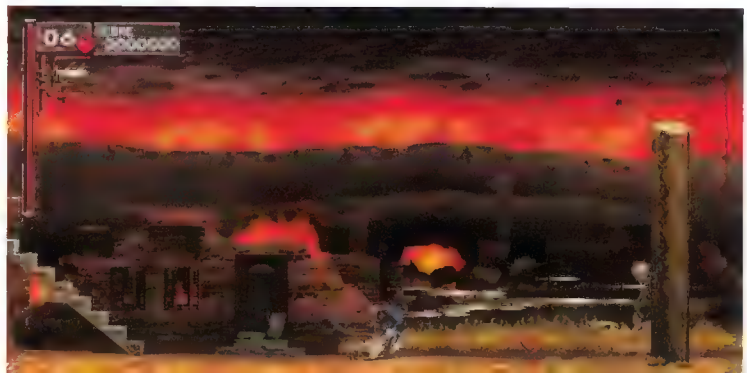
You want more, you say? *More*? How about an in-game custom soundtrack feature that allows you to assemble your own soundtrack from the spectacular tunes of all three games?

> "...it's a safe bet that there will be several more treats packed into this already full-to-bursting UMD."
>
> **With Chronicles we draw one step closer to an original side-scrolling next-gen Castlevania.**

(Yep, the Rondo remake is getting a new soundtrack—hopefully a symphonic remix of the brilliant-but-synthy original.) And since the whole package is being overseen by Koji "Dark Lord of Easter Eggs" Igarashi, it's a safe bet that there will be several more treats packed into this already full-to-bursting UMD.

With a combined eBay value of around $200 for the original versions or Rondo and Symphony, it's safe to say that The Dracula X Chronicles is going to be a pretty decent value. And if the new version of Rondo is half as good as the original, it's going to be a damn fine game as well.



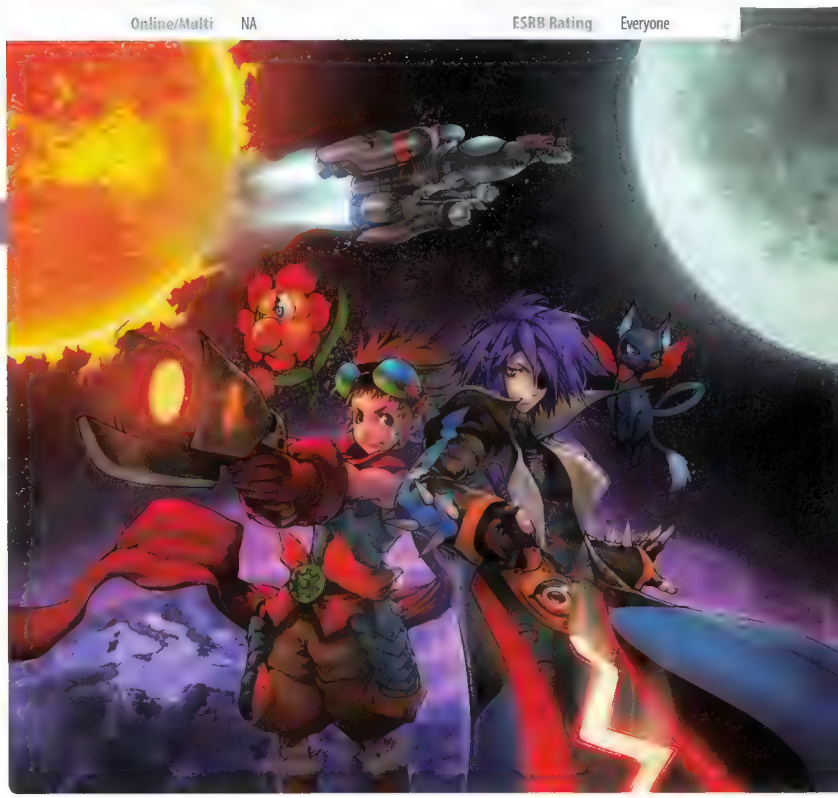


System(s)	Nintendo DS	Publisher	Konami	Available	February 2007
Developer	Kojima Productions	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	Everyone

Lunar Knights

words **Eric L. Patterson**

Fighting evil by moonlight, waking but by daylight



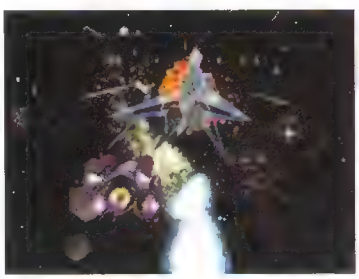
Gimmicks in gaming attempt to bring something new and unique to a genre or series beyond what we've seen before; sometimes they work, sometimes they don't. With the Boktai series for the GameBoy Advance, Kojima Productions presented a new twist on the classic idea of vampire slaying by building a special sensor into the game cartridges to allow players to capture and utilize actual sunlight. Unfortunately, it didn't work so well for people in many parts of the world: Alaska, Northern Europe, parent's basements, and so on. So, for the game's jump to the DS, a new plan of attack was proposed.

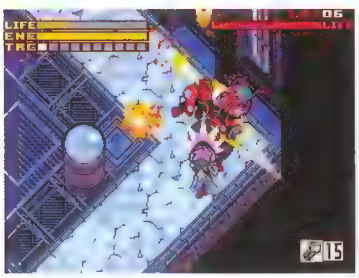
For Lunar Knights, the top screen on the DS plays host to a virtual environmental system dubbed "paraSOL," which serves up not only faux sunlight, negating the need to expose yourself to that nasty real-life sun, but also virtual moonlight as well. This gives us the duality of the game's two heroes: Aaron, a scrappy young Guild gunman who taps the sun's energy to power an array of Solan Guns, and Lucian, a more up close and personal Dark Swordsman who gets his strength from the moon.

Aaron and Lucian can be switched on the fly, alternating game play between run-and-gun and hack-and-slash depending on your preferred style, or your need at the time. Most of this action takes place in a variety of dungeons, filled to the brim with monsters both alive and undead, and everything has been crafted lovingly with beautiful 2D artwork. Another aspect Kojima Productions obviously worked hard on is the game's control, which avoids many of the problems other games with isometric perspectives often face, as well as providing a very welcome enemy lock-on system. The one downfall is running: character movement is a bit too slow for my tastes, and running (via double tap) not only consumes your precious ENE meter, but is also far too easy to unintentionally do on the DS Lite's directional pad.

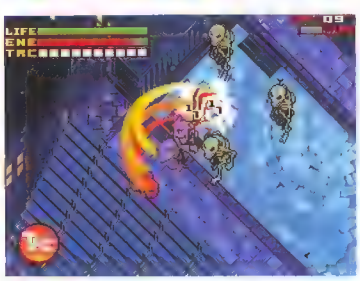
The villainous vampire bosses that rule over the enslaved humans in Lunar Knights are first battled traditionally, requiring you to combine and make the most of both character's unique talents. Once you've knocked a boss down for the count, the game switches gears into shooter mode, blasting Lucian and Aaron off into orbit in the giant robot Casket Rocket to deliver a final death blow of concentrated sunlight from an orbiting satellite. Mixing a tasty cocktail of action/adventure and shooter is nothing new–I enjoyed the sweet taste of The Guardian Legend way back in '88–but I was really impressed by how well the touch-controlled shooter segments worked in Lunar Knights. Flying the Casket Rocket may at first seem simplistic and easy, but as the difficulty ramps up and new weapons are unlocked, true appreciation for the segments quickly sets in.

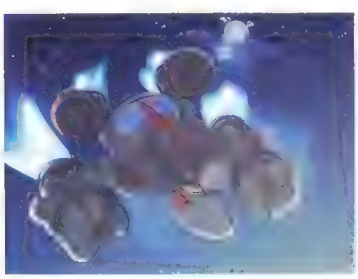
"For me, however, the highlight of Lunar Knights is how the game unfolds."





For me, however, the highlight of Lunar Knights is how the game unfolds as the bosses go down and the true potential of the game's paraSOL system comes into play. Not only do we get a virtual sun and moon, but also climate: change the paraSOL's climate settings from "tropical rainforest" to "arctic," for example, and the game's dynamic weather conditions, temperature, humidity level, and wind speed are all affected. As you modify the climate, previously unreachable areas are opened, armor and accessories gain or lose functionality, and monsters become weaker or stronger depending on what elemental type they are. The entire idea was thought out and executed amazingly well, and helps Lunar Knights truly feel like something special.





	PSP		Eidos		Now
	Deadline Games A/S		1-4		M

Chili Con Carnage

words **Greg Orlando**

Now with extra-killing sauce

Chickens, beware. Ramiro Cruz is armed to the teeth and is not afraid to put his quest for vengeance on hold to just enjoy the simple pleasures of blasting some poultry with a pistol or rifle, sending the thing flying into the air where it can be shot—and thus juggled—repeatedly. Nor is Cruz afraid of the exploding chickens that will be hurled at him as he proceeds to wreck his father's killer; Cruz can target objects in the air and blast them. The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals will be most displeased.

Cruz is a handheld Max Payne in the hyperbolic third-person shooter Chili Con Carnage. But where Payne was overly dramatic, verbose, and haunted—Payne had to navigate across a series of perilously thin blood trails in his first game—Cruz is happy's man angel of vengeance. He jogs at an exaggeratedly goofy pace and, when he leaps into his slow-motion attack and slaughters a few enemies (definitely a nod to Payne's bullet-time), he can emerge on top of a foe's body and catch the dead man's hat on his head before it hits the ground.

Slaughter becomes its own minigame here, with kills serving to fill up a combination meter. Keeping the meter filled allows for greater and greater point combinations, and the game rewards players for their creativity and style. Cruz can use a wall, say, to propel himself up into the air, flipping his body dramatically end-over-end, and blast foes in slow-motion. Cruz will be rewarded for explosive kills, for dramatic maneuvers, for head shots, and for catching a man's hat before it hits the ground. This helps keep the game's tension level high, even when the lure of blasting thugs has peaked and, then, diminished.

Goofiness serves as the game's great lubricant, helping to keep the ride relatively sputter-free. During one stage, Cruz gets to blast men in chicken suits; at other times, he can utilize ridiculous power-ups to gain access to, say, a pair of machine-gun firing guitar cases, a crazed cripple named El Gimpo, or exploding piñata. This overwhelming sense of whimsy, combined with a fairly simple set of objectives that put the attention squarely on running and gunning, serves Carnage well.

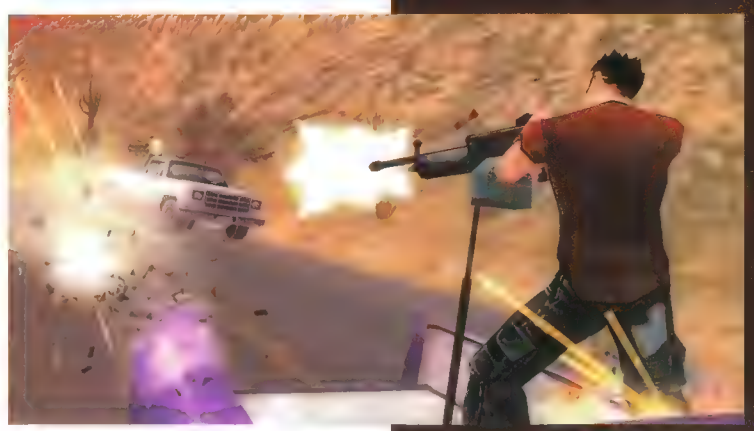
For some reason, the developers have opted to make Cruz' movements excessively rapid and jerky; he bounces around like an 8-year-old after a sugar transfusion. It might be a stylish choice, but this movement is odd and off-putting, like watching a film that's out of sync. Targeting, too, isn't as precise as it should be when Cruz is executing his dives; players will frequently sweep the gun cursor right across a target's body to shoot at nothing, and the lock-on feature doesn't always compensate. But even this is minor, as Cruz can erase his great failures (and multiple deaths) with a rewind feature. Carnage can be delayed, but not so easily stopped.

Chili Con Carnage

score 7.5

"Goofiness serves as the game's great lubricant, helping to keep the ride relatively sputter-free."

El Carne Loco



	DS/PSP (PSP reviewed)		Ubisoft	Available	Out Now
	Ubisoft Montreal		WiFi Multi	ESRB Rating	T

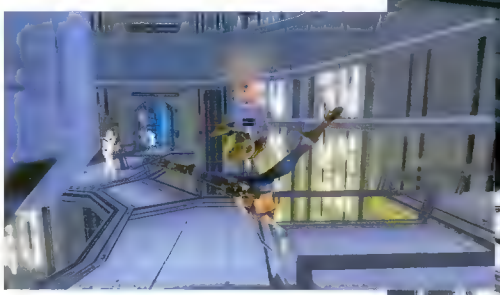
Star Wars: Lethal Alliance

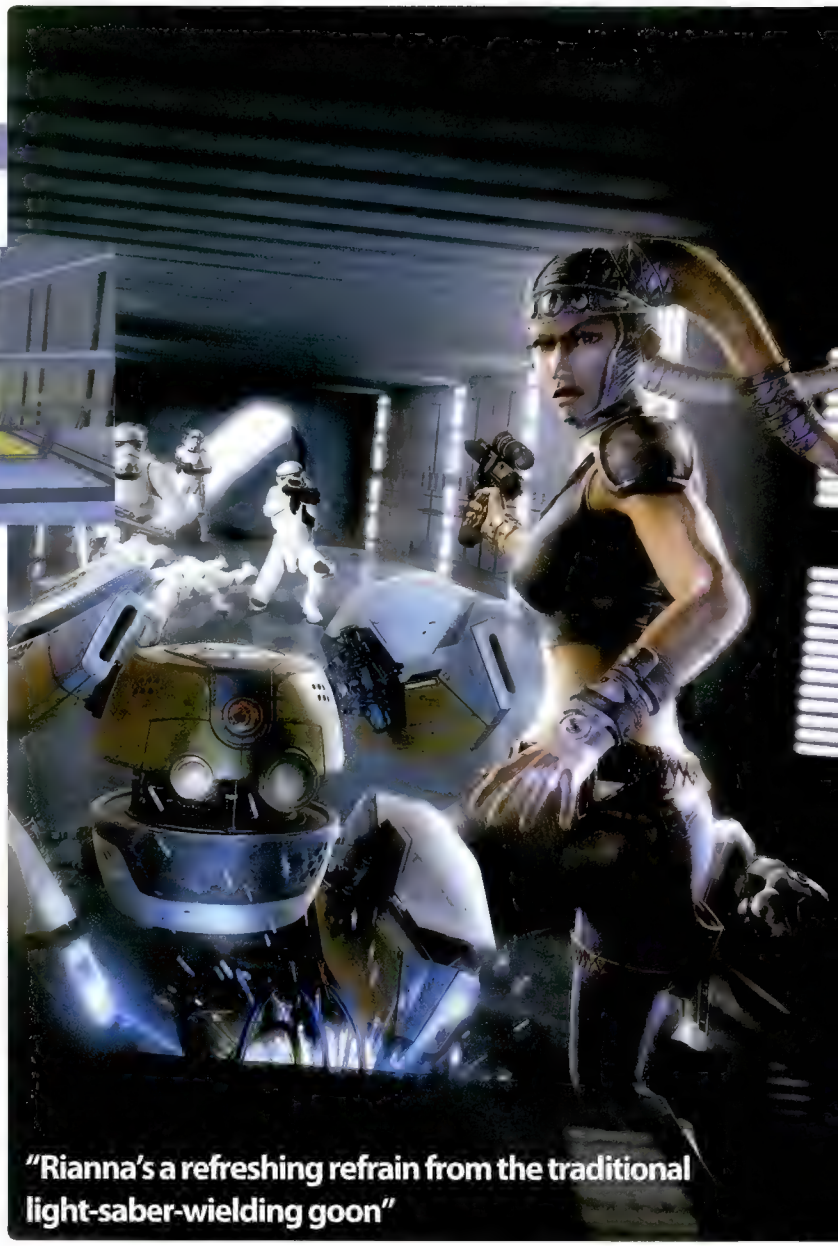
words Dave Halverson

They finally made a 3D Star Wars game that I like, so it makes total sense that it's getting a Luke-warm reception from fanatical fans. Not only is Lethal Alliance the first quality Star Wars platformer since its run on the SNES, but it stars a "Twi'lek" (a full-blown hotty with head tails) named Rianna (yes—a woman by Yoda!) and is the first SW game built from the ground up for handhelds. It's hard to look at on DS (so don't) but on PSP, things are just peachy.

The plans for the Death Star need stealing and Rianna is the perfect girl for the job, battling her way through destinations from Tatooine to the Death Star, along with never-before-seen locations on Despayre, Danuta and Alderaan, encountering the likes of Boba Fett, Princess Leia Organa, Darth Vader, Rodians (sounds painful), legions of stormtroopers and all manner of Lucas-bred beasties. A nimble female with a handy little helper, Rianna's a refreshing refrain from the traditional light-saber-wielding goon. Her new best friend (the Swiss Army knife of droids) little Zeeo attacks, slices (hacks), and doubles as both a hover jet and wall scooter. While Zeeo is busy hacking databases, Rianna lays down cover fire via smooth, lock-on shooting, turret play or, if she's close enough, an evolving quiver of close proximity combos. In between she goes vertical by nimbly bounding between footholds and floating platforms or scoots about walls and ceilings with Zeeo, before capping off each area by jetting to safety through treacherous indigenous corridors.

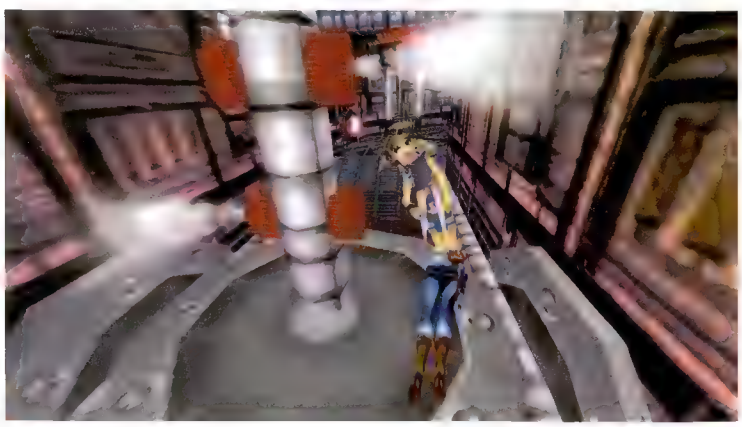
The game's only undoing comes when attempting to fend off TIE fighters using the infamous Star Wars rear turret. The shooting alone is difficult enough but for some reason UM added an overheating element to the proceedings, where you need to switch Zeeo between repairing the ship and cooling the guns; annoying as Jar Jar Binks but a small blemish on an otherwise exceptional Star Wars game.





"Rianna's a refreshing refrain from the traditional light-saber-wielding goon"

score 7.5



System(s)	PSP	Publisher	SCEA	Available	February 13
Developer	High Impact Games	Online/Multi	2-4 players via WiFi multiplayer gameplay	ESRB Rating	E

Ratchet and Clank
Size Matters

words **Dave Halverson**

Old PS2 franchises don't die, they just go to PSP. Perhaps it's just a matter of time before we see Sly and Jak on the small screen. In the meantime the fourth installment of Ratchet & Clank beckons, the second Sony franchise to find success at the hands of a new studio. What Ready at Dawn did for the Jak & Daxter series, extracting Jak and fashioning a killer game around his uber rodent, High Impact Games has somehow done for Ratchet and Clank (sans extraction), reinvigorating the series after three turns on the PS2. As cutting edge as 2 & 3 were on PS2, the game design had me pining for a more concentrated effort; less shooting and drawn out events and more raw action and platforming, which is coincidentally exactly what High Impact have delivered. All of the series hallmarks are in Size Matters: the best action/shooting this side of 3D, clever platforming and grappling, and the occasional Clank mission, only on PSP, they come fast and often. One minute you're in close combat and the next, engaged in a triple-A space shooter (a Clank morph that stands as perhaps the best series minigame ever). There are psychedelic platforming zones inside of a Ratchet coma, neat little diversions such as Robot Wars where clank goes old school in a top-down demolition, obstacle-based sky board races, mimic plants (see interview) and straight out of Sonic, Grind Lock (rail grinding) that Sonic Team should use as a model for how to make it less dodgy and more fun. Quark is all over the story too, which is once again thoroughly engaging space fodder as the duo's vacation is interrupted by a kidnapped girl, who leads them into a diabolical trap that leads them to a forgotten race of genius inventors called Technomites. The games also features a new armor system (made up of individual pieces that show on the model), allowing Ratchet to upgrade and use a variation of special abilities and powers. It all makes for the second stellar 3D first party platformer from SCEA, and is obviously the work of seasoned platforming experts. But who is High Impact?

Ratchet and Clank: Size Matters

score 9.0

+

-

"What Ready at Dawn did for the Jak & Daxter series...High Impact Games has somehow done for Ratchet and Clank."

Interview

play: The game seems to take on a whole new life on PSP...That of a more compact platformer— not so spread out and task oriented but where cool ideas come and go at a rapid pace. It's my dream R&C game. Is this due mainly to the shorter play times associated with handhelds? The levels are still quite huge though...so it's not like you sacrificed anything...
Alex Hampton, Gameplay Programmer: Yes, and I think "compact" is the right word for the core of the game. Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters has a full length story that can be played in bite-sized chunks. Shorter session times were definitely a consideration in that regard, but there is still so much outside of the core of the game for players (like myself) that like to explore every inch of a game. A short session can uncover new story elements and provide action-packed gameplay. But, I can also spend hours fighting my nemesis in multiplayer, or becoming a master skyboarder.

Taking on a legendary franchise from a legendary developer must have a been a little nerve racking. Or is there some alumni in the shop? This sure feels authentic...
Lesley Mathieson, Design Director: We're very fortunate to have a lot of very experienced people at High Impact Games. Several people here have worked on past Ratchet & Clank titles, and their experience has been invaluable. But the credit shouldn't go just to them – we had a number of extremely talented artists, programmers, and designers from all parts of the industry, eager to take on the challenge and fun of this series. The entire team was excited to re-capture the humor and adventure found in the past Ratchet games.

The gameplay is familiar but also new in many respects. You've definitely put your stamp on it and created a phenomenal PSP version. Grind Lock, Sky Board Races, Robot War, the Giant Clank Shooter, and the ultra cool coma-induced mind trip are all great ideas wonderfully implemented. How long a process was the planning aspect of the development? Was it a round table or a product of certain individuals?
Jason Fourier, Systems Programmer: Design for Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters was ongoing for most of the project. We found that you can't really nail down a design at the beginning and expect it to work all the way to the end, no matter how clever it may be. You need to test the design ideas in the game, see what works and what's fun, and go back and fix it if it can be improved. Along the way, you find inspiration in what you've created so far; so, great new ideas can sometimes come up in the middle of the project. I think this process is what enabled us to come up with something really fun in the end. We had a preproduction phase of only about 2 months, since people were very eager to get the project

going, and the ideas came fast and furious. We have a talented core design team that contributes most of the design decisions. But since the company is small and we keep a friendly atmosphere that encourages openness, everyone in the company ends up contributing ideas to the design, regardless of their role.

Lets talk about the Clank Shooter. Were you influenced by StarFox at all? How many waves/levels do we get total?
Avery Bennet, Designer: Space shooters really hold a special place in my heart, and I was excited to capture the action of a great history of them. Piloting Giant Clank through a huge battle in space is just one of those rare opportunities to run wild, and thanks to a ton of great programming and polish, I think we achieved something elegant, unique, and visually stunning. On the first playthrough, you'll see two full segments of the shooter. The second is a side-quest, but I highly recommend you check it out. It's definitely my favorite of the two, and has several extra surprises. And if your appetite still isn't satisfied, then you absolutely must check out Giant Clank in replay mode. I'll let the fans find out what's there for themselves.

I like the mimic bits as well. Does this facet of the gameplay blossom throughout?
Avery Bennet, Designer: The Sprout-o-Matic is one of the more unique gadgets we've ever put in a *Ratchet & Clank* title, and throughout the adventure you'll really see its gameplay "take root" and grow. The whole idea of watering these little Mimic plants, who will then follow you around and fulfill important tasks was really exciting, and we put it in as many places as we could. You'll see a variety of Mimics that can do completely different things, from destroying walls to letting you cross gaps in... let's say, "peculiar" ways. I don't want to spoil too much!

The Music and voice are superb. Quark, Clank and Ratchet are all done by their console counterparts. Who wrote the script? It's great and among the most extensive live vocal-wise I've come across for a PSP game.
Oliver Wade, Script Writer/Concept Artist: Oliver Wade wrote the script based on a story that was developed by a lot of people here at High Impact. Oliver also co-wrote the first two installments of Ratchet & Clank on the PS2. It was very important for us to maintain the high quality of the original series so we turned to the same voice actors who have done such a great job in the past. James Arnold Taylor is Ratchet, no one else but David Kaye could be Clank and Jim Ward is Captain Qwark. We tried to tell a fun story that would keep the player wanting to move forward to learn more while making sure it was tied to the gameplay. Also, we did our best to incorporate the oddball Ratchet and Clank style of humor, so hopefully people will have a laugh or two along the way as well.

"The Sprout-o-Matic is one of the more unique gadgets we've ever put in a Ratchet & Clank title..."

This is more or less the work of skilled platformer creators...the shooting is awesome as usual but this game has sick (the good kind) platforming, more so than any of the console versions (thank you). Who on the team comes from a platforming background? Tell us more about High Impact.
Ken Strickland, Designer: First off, High Impact is a very collaborative studio. It'd be nice if we could claim that all the great platforming in Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters was a design invention, but there were a lot of scribbled notes, tugged shirtsleeves, helpful suggestions, ominous

looming, (downright better ideas), and the occasional threat of stapler beating from the team at large. Obviously, quite a few folks here at High Impact have worked on the Ratchet & Clank games before, and during that time they absorbed valuable gameplay radiation from their handlings of the franchise. Their interest in putting a unique spin on the series went a long way in defining Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters. In addition to folks that worked directly on the Ratchet & Clank series, we've also got some folks that worked on other platformers that have brought their own secret styles to our gameplay dojo. Some of our developers worked on "The Incredibles" series, and fueled the solid platforming and boss monsters there with retellings of their own exploits. We also have a few folks that worked on the Shrek games who bonded over breaks from their brazen polygon manipulation by practicing covert danger scenarios, like avoiding laser grids or jumping lava pits in the park.

How long have you been working on the game? How big a team?
Atsuko Kubota, Art Director: We've been working on the game for a little over a year. The team is about 35 people.

So, is this a revival? Will we see a series on PSP, or does that depend on how this one performs?
Atsuko Kubota, Art Director: It's a revival in the sense that we went for the earlier Ratchet & Clank art style which is more colorful and rhythmical. But this is a completely new game with a new story, new enemies and new environments. Since we had such a good time making this game and we have a solid engine already made for it, I would love to see a series on the PSP.

Is High Impact a PSP exclusive Sony shop or will you also develop for PS3? If yes, what innovations would you like to see on say, a PSP 2?
Dave Goodrich, Senior Designer: While High Impact loves working on the PSP and hopes to in the future, we also like to remain on the cutting edge of game development and are always looking to work on Sony's new technology. We would like to see some more of the PSP's features get taken advantage such as downloadable content, picture downloads and GPS functionality incorporated into games. While this does create a challenge for designers and engineers it would break new ground with portable game.

And finally...Any 2D surprises in here?
Lesley Mathieson, Design Director: While you won't see Qwark's vid-comic adventures returning, we have added some 2D gameplay, Clank-style. We call them Survival challenges, and they've proven to be pretty exciting among fans who love commanding Clank's legion of Gadgebots.

"...this is a completely new game with a new story, new enemies and new environments."

Armored up and ready for action.

Gurumin

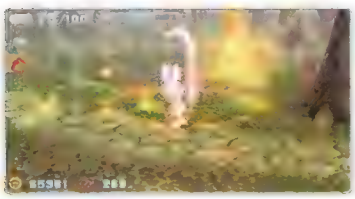
score 8.5

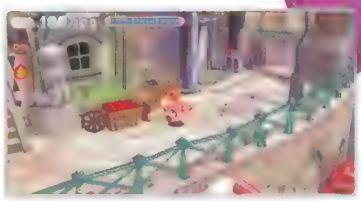
System	PSP	**Online/Multi**	NA
Developer	Nihon Falcom	**Available**	February
Publisher	Mastiff	**ESRB Rating**	E

My second look at the now-polished Gurumin was invigorating. Charming, full of personality, and with a gentle sense of humor, Gurumin is a bright and catchy portable game. The voice acting is decent (although sometimes miscast), and the level design is playful, if a bit straightforward. Nihon Falcom has brought old-school style to the modern PSP without losing anything in the transition. Any loading problems associated with the alpha have been dissolved, and Gurumin shines as a necessary action-platformer for the Playstation Portable.

Undoubtedly, the PSP needs a game designed like this. Actually, the PSP needs a redesign. The game is best engaged via the analog stick, and as PSP players know, any extended thumb-sessions with the shifty tab are likely to leave your hands sore. Were the analog pad in the primary thumb position, a game like this would shine. Alas, that's a complaint for Sony, not for Mastiff or Falcolm.

In fact, few complaints can be leveled at Falcolm for this game. It's a bit on the short side, but then again, time always flies when you're having fun. It may be anime-styled, but the characters aren't ignorant of their templates; Mastiff had fun translating the dialogue into quirky bits of comedy. With so many ports happening on the PSP, Gurumin is the one port we're happy to see in the States. After all, it's original here. **Heather Campbell**





Hotel Dusk: Room 215

score 9.0

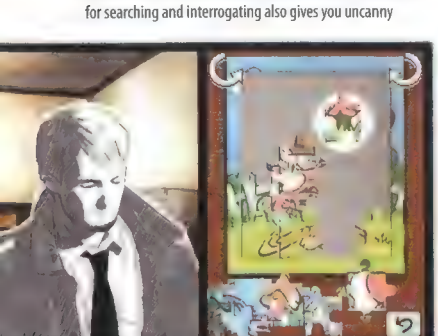
System	Nintendo DS	**Online/Multi**	1 Player
Developer	Cing	**Available**	January 2007
Publisher	Nintendo	**ESRB Rating**	Teen

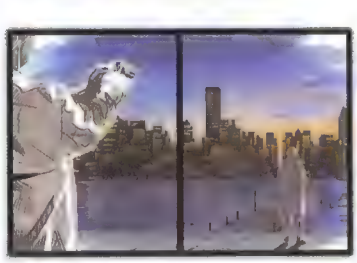
Hotel Dusk gives you control of Kyle Hyde, ex-cop, current salesman still searching for his crooked ex-partner. His job brings him to an old hotel in Nevada full of suspicious characters and what just may hold the key to his quest.

An adventure game you hold like a book, the style and designs in Hotel Dusk were the first things that caught my eye. The film noir style and sketch characters set the tone of the game perfectly. It's dark, as a mystery should be, but not without humor as Kyle has a great sarcastic wit when it comes to interrogating the perps. Using the stylus for searching and interrogating also gives you uncanny control of the story, and the ability to write your own notes and reminders in Kyle's notebook is an awesome touch.

This is an adventure game, so if you're averse to reading, then this game isn't for you. Also, like all adventure games if you miss one little detail you will probably spend an hour or so retracing your steps trying the figure out what the heck you missed. Kyle also has an annoying habit of repeating and stating the obvious, which may be intentional as a few of the other characters ask him why he is repeating himself again, and again.

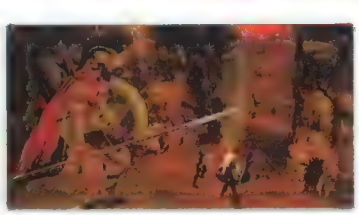
These complaints are minor though in an overall awesome game. Hotel Dusk is fun, uniquely designed and has an absorbing mystery to solve. As far as adventure games go, you can't do much better than this on the NDS. **Daniel Campisi**





300: March to Glory

System	PSP	**Online/Multi**	NA
Developer	Collision Studios	**Available**	March
Publisher	Warner Bros. Int.	**ESRB Rating**	M



Directly inspired by the movie and tailor made for the PSP, Warner Bros. Interactive's 300 is ready for its debut along side one of the most exciting films of 2007. March of Glory tells the story of King Leonidas who, along with 300 Spartan warriors, battled insurmountable odds against Xerxes and his tyrannical Persian army. Using the Wrath combat system, players join the fray where Leonidas' health is directly connected with his defensive battle skills and mastery of attacks. Choose and upgrade Sword and Shield, Spear and Shield, or Dual Swords and dive into visceral action. It's gonna get bloody. **Dave Halverson**

M.A.C.H (Modified Air Combat Heroes)

score 5.5

System	PSP	**Online/Multi**	1-8
Developer	Kuju	**Available**	February
Publisher	Sierra	**ESRB Rating**	E 10+

They should give out peanuts on this plane ride. M.A.C.H. offers racing and air combat that's not so much frenetic as it is leisurely, and not so much fun as it is option-laden. M.A.C.H. is a futuristic plane game, but only because it's supposedly set in 2049—a fine year for racing games. In truth, there's nothing that's futuristic about this PSP title, save for the fact a plane can run over an invisibility powerup and go translucent for all of ten seconds.

There's a lot of planes to buy, and options to upgrade a plane's tail, fins, engine, guns, wings, and the like. Yet it doesn't make up for the fact that the game's compact air-combat arenas make it easy for players to hover near the bottom of the screen, collect missile powerups, potshot the enemy, and repeat. Nor does it alter the reality that there's very little sense of speed imparted to any of the planes.

Sadly, there's not much to note, either good or bad about M.A.C.H. It simply wallows in its competence, but doesn't do much—okay, anything—to try and exceed it. It's fine for a quick diversion or 8-player multiplayer, but otherwise, these skies are strictly, as they say, for the birds. **Greg Orlando**

Valhalla Knights

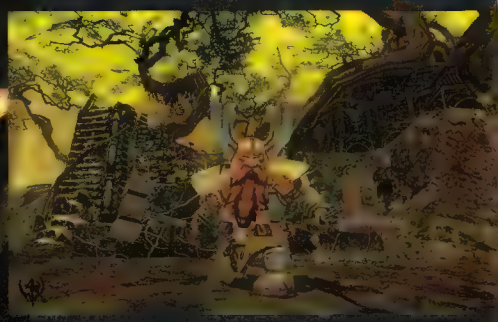
score 8.5

System	PSP	**Online/Multi**	1-2 Player Local
Developer	Marvelous Interactive / K2	**Available**	March 2007
Publisher	XSEED	**ESRB Rating**	Teen

One of the best things about my job is discovering those hidden gems that I probably never would have played on my own time. Valhalla Knights, for me, is such a game.

I love Japanese RPGs, but let's face it: the genre is in need of some updating. For Valhalla Knights, I'd swear somebody stole my "how to make RPGs better" list and used it as a production guide. Character customization is rich, from being able to select the race, sex, and class of all of your party members, to armor and weapons altering your character's appearance depending on what you have equipped. Battles come not randomly, but from visible monsters which roam the earth, and you can even avoid them by sneaking around Metal Gear Solid style, complete with range of vision cones on the game's mini map. Once in combat, it's all real-time action, with your party members providing A.I.-controlled back-up according to behavioral settings you can configure to your liking.

There's so much to love about how Valhalla Knights plays, and if the story line and world were just more developed, this would be an epic RPG series that could go toe to toe with the big boys. Still, it's a fabulous dungeon crawler, and easily the best PSP RPG to hit our shores. **Eric L. Patterson**



WARHAMMER ONLINE AGE OF RECKONING

An axe to grind, a hammer to strike

words **Mike Griffin**

Rarely does one encounter a game designing duo with the presence and chemistry of EA Mythic's Jeff Hickman and Paul Barnett. The Senior Producer and Design Manager at the helm of Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning (and its 150 person team) offer a lively presentation filled with eccentricity and ever-humorous banter. Paul's seemingly indefatigable zest for extreme Brit-inflected descriptions of Warhammer lore and Jeff's ironclad grasp of massively multiplayer concepts transforms the average PowerPoint presentation into an entertaining, often bizarre and thoroughly informative stand-up routine. We conducted a running interview with both gentlemen while engaging in hands-on gameplay with the latest development build of Warhammer Online, now fortified with Chaos and Empire faction goodness.

As Paul recounts a few early design clarifications ("There are *no* girl Orcs!"), we ask him what helps to shape Warhammer Online's story. Paul explains, "We actually take almost all our influence from direct communication with people like [Games Workshop's] Rick Priestly and Alan Merit—the guardians of that which is Warhammer. We basically get them to tell us what they believe are the tenets of Warhammer." While Paul had ten years of consulting for GW under his belt at the project's outset, it was the first time that most EA Mythic staff had worked on the coveted 25 year old fantasy IP—an exciting and intimidating endeavor. Paul approached the team with a simple message: "I just explained to them that we have a wondrous IP, and what we need to do is focus on making all our character careers play wondrously well. We need to have courage in our convictions and a purity of purpose."

While investigating the Armies of Order, comprised of the Empire, High Elf and Dwarven factions, we asked Paul about designing the Empire's distinctive hammer-wielding Knight of the Blazing Sun, the faction's heavy tank. "Our designers, god bless them, get easily confused," he muses. "They want to keep designing. They won't leave well

Paul Barnett

Jeff Hickman

- Warhammer Online role: Senior Producer
- Years in games industry: 6 Years
- Last project: Dark Age of Camelot: Darkness Rising
- All-time favorite games: Civilization, Legend of Zelda and Dark Age of Camelot.
- Best WAR feature so far: "The glory that is the Chaos play area and quests."

"My job is to keep banging the drum, saying we paid good money for this IP, it works, let's stick with it."

Paul Barnett, EA Mythic

(Below) At the Gates of Ekrund, a vicious Orc Choppa roars in defiance.

enough alone. They don't realize that one good idea fully realized is all you're ever going to need. I was asked [by the designers] whether they can use axes. No, I say, it's hammers only. Can they use swords? No, just hammers. Can they use daggers? No! Flails? No! How about bows and arrows? No! Only hammers!" And by the sign of Sigmar, he made it so.

Paul describes a similar situation with the Empire's Bright Wizard, a pyromaniac mage to the core. "Designers will ask, 'Can't they use different types of spells?' I say no, it's just fire. See, they weren't asking me if they could use things other than hammers or fire 'cause they were being dumb. They were just doing what designers do: finding ways to make the game more exciting, looking for difference, for subtlety. My job is to keep banging the drum, saying we paid good money for this IP, it works, let's stick with it." Rounding out the careers of the Empire are the Warrior Priest, a rugged holy healer, and the Witch Hunter, a deadly melee DPS fighter. While the leaders of the human Empire have steeled themselves against corruption, it is the Age of Reckoning, apocalypse looms near, and many humans have slipped into the debauchery-fueled worship of foul ancient gods, or worse.

The Armies of Destruction contain the forces of Chaos, the Dark Elves and the Greenskins. The Chaos legions camp the Empire's doorstep, led by sinister Daemon Lords whose life essence boils with corrupted energy. You'll want to take the Chaos Magus for a spin. This staff-wielding offensive caster channels corrupted magical energies through his bird god. He also rides a cool floating disc *all the time*. We ask Paul if the Magus can ever get off his floating disc, to which he responds, "No! Honestly, no." Think hoverboard, grafted to one's feet. Must've been a headache to get that working? "For every great win, there's also a great loss," Paul concedes. "I may have managed to get the sorcerer on the disc and thus ensured that we don't have to do wandering around animations, but where I give with one hand, I take with another." He highlights some fantastically mutated freaks in the corrupted Chaos region: "Entire transformation of body parts! Tentacles for god's sake! Crab claws, extra eyes and horns! Demon tongues! And yes, these things also have a performance cost, so it's a give and take.

Next we decided to test drive a diminutive Goblin Squig Herder on the awesome Gates of Ekrund PvP scenario map. EA Mythic is absolutely on the right track with these highly-designed themed battlefields. And we noticed that unlike the PvE areas, there's full player collision inside the PvP scenario maps. We ask Jeff if organized body blocking would be a concern. The producer smiles and explains: "That's exactly what we want you to do. That's the whole goal. If you've got the strategy to put those things together and pull it off, and everyone coming against you doesn't blow a hole through it...then hallelujah, that's the way you should be winning. It's not just about button mashing and pummeling people. It's about skill." For those wondering, yes, there's a queue matchmaking system (a la WoW) to sync-up players in the instanced PvP scenarios. To cut down on wait times, NPC henchmen called Dogs of War can be enlisted to fill out a party. Our updated tour of Destruction forces ended with the Chosen, the hulking melee power tanker for Chaos players, and the Zealot, another crazed bird god-worshipping Chaos caster with healing powers.

The Marsh Temple map housed the next PvP scenario match-up. This time we take control of a sturdy Dwarven tank, wading into battle against big, bad ass Orc Choppas. With bones of iron and gruff voices that sound like stone grinding against stone, the Warhammer Online Dwarf is one of the most effective character designs. We asked Paul if any polygonal character representations were based on their toy counterparts. "Well the thing about it is, you're not basing the images on the models. That's one of those classic things people do. We're basing it on the concept, the *idea*. When you look at the world of Warhammer, you find out there are books, models, oil paintings, little scratchy pictures, wonderful models.

Q&A

Will Warhammer Online have Warpstone-snorting Skaven junkies?
Paul Barnett: "Skaven are gonna be mainlining the green dust, we all know it."
Jeff Hickman: "Uh, I don't know about that..."

conversions of models, enormous sculptures...there are things that have been written about characters that have never been realized as an image. So we say to our guys: Don't just look at the toy soldiers. Look at the idea, and realize that." One thing is certain: Orcs are big. As per Jeff's aforementioned enthusiasm about using body blocking, we suspect on a scenario map like Marsh Temple a wall of hulking Orcs will work wonders.

One of Warhammer Online's defining features at this stage is its Tome of Knowledge, an attractive and detailed book interface that tracks lore and player achievements. Since every single zone in the game has both PvE and PvP gameplay, as well as exciting Public Quests that random players can take part in, EA Mythic needed a good way to allow players to track their progress. Jeff elucidates, "We talk a lot about breaking out of the shell of MMO'ness. We don't want to go too far so it feels uncomfortable for players, but there are places to innovate in the UI. I think the Tome of Knowledge is the first glimpse of that. We'll be doing things with unlocks, with scrapbooks, with exploration and other achievements, and it's all going to culminate in the Tome." Paul quickly adds: "Our interface needs to be a glorious addition to what we're trying to do. It needs to be clear, informative, but also joyous. The Tome of Knowledge is our first piece of truly joyous interface." Players will be able to use the Tome to monitor their influence with NPCs, their successes in PvP, renown earned via Realm vs.

> ..through quests or Public Quests, through items, or through the renown system, we slowly make the desire for PvP greater."
>
> **Jeff Hickman, EA Mythic**

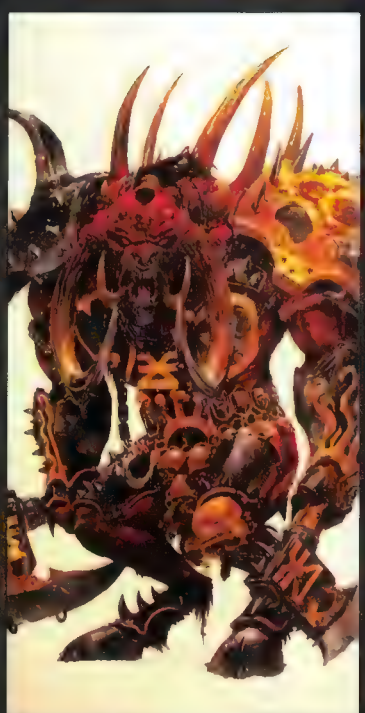
Realm victories, and heaps of cool lore and story bits—written in a unique style for each race, no less.

As our time at EA Mythic concluded, one question remained for a drained-looking Jeff Hickman: How do you get non-PvP'ers involved in Warhammer Online's epic, world-spanning, capital city-seizing Realm vs. Realm gameplay? "It's up to players. If they want to come in and PvE only, we've got a great PvE game; it's going to kick ass. There's a solo game, a group game, and we have multi-group too. As far as Realm vs. Realm, what we do, whether through quests or Public Quests, through items, or through the renown system, we slowly make the desire for PvP greater and greater. As they travel the world players will be seeing things that encourage it. They're gonna be walking along a river, and right on the other side of the river they'll see RvR happening and think, hey, that looks pretty cool. And look, I've got a quest over there with a great reward. And have you seen the renown reward I get for participating? So we just lay out a trail of crumbs for them to eat their way into RvR." After munching on these crumbs for a day, we liked the taste. And the WAR marches on. **Play**

Q&A

How distinct are the homeland regions?

Paul Barnett: "When faced with the difficulty of how to make things look different, we just went back to the source material. Chaos is great. You look at it, it's evocative. And you're going to look at the High Elf area, they're the most elegant people, you'll see towering spires. It's going to be great. Not lots of the black, and that whole idea of them harvesting through the land, leaving everything to ashes, replacing it with mushrooms. Every area we've got really ties the race in question actually right back."



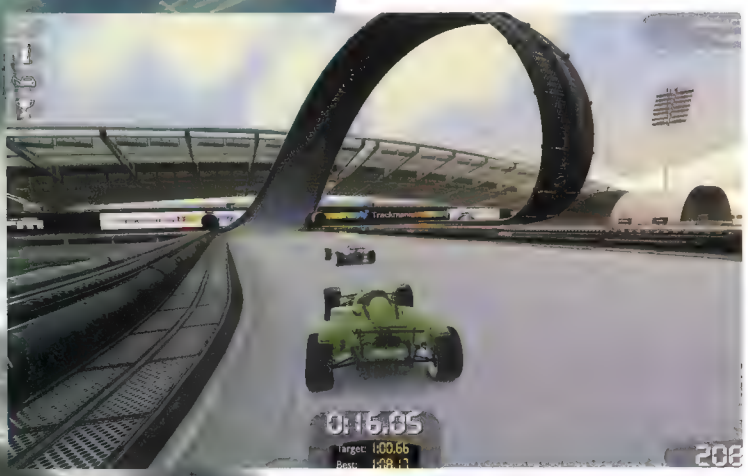
Q&A

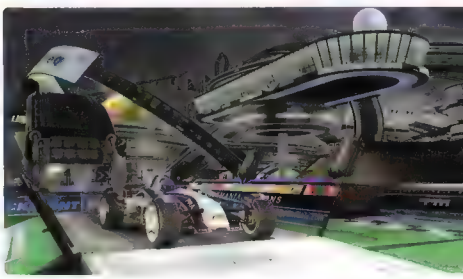
What MMO are you playing now?

Jeff Hickman: Burning Crusade right now. I also have a level 60 in EQ 2. I'll play Vanguard next. I play every MMO I merely dip out and level one in every game so I know what's going on.

Paul Barnett: He plays everything. He has a great big list on his desk. I'm not kidding—a great big pad full of scribble. He'll go home and play, and then he'll be another eighteen things on his pad later.

Developer	Nadeo	Publisher	Nadeo
Online/Multi	Ranking, peer-to-peer item trades	Available	March





Wild track design and great handling

TrackMania United

Loop the loop around the world

Mike Griffin

If you've ever wanted to try a TrackMania game, United is the one. This is Nadeo's most fully-realized entry in the series thus far, and TMU also includes some really commendable online features that no other racer offers. Along with its unparalleled track creation system, you have a racer that keeps giving back, months after purchase.

On the heels of TrackMania Sunrise and Nations, TMU (as the "United" suggests) represents an amalgamation of the series. Old tracks and vehicles have been given a fresh coat of shaders and detail, 200 new tracks are included, and the track making editor now provides over 1000 blocks to tinker with. Other content additions like motocross-style stadium tracks—complete with nice dirt build-up on vehicles—will please returning fans, while newcomers will appreciate the huge selection of existing tracks and vehicles across the Bay, Island, Coast, Desert and Snow-themed track designs. If you manage to consume all this built-in content, the world is waiting with an endless supply of additions for your game.

TMU's built-in community features are excellent, easily one of the top reasons to own the game. Players may set up their own free homepage with detailed profile, buddy lists, leaderboards and more. The ManiaLinks info space lets you upload or download tracks, replays, videos, and car skins—all from within TMU's colorful menus. Since every player has the core toolset (plus assets) on their PC, it's possible to join regional or international gameplay servers and play new tracks on the fly. Stylized intro cinematics can be created for tracks and it's always interesting to see what other players have conceived. Most uploads and downloads are purchased via Copper, the in-game (not micro-transaction) currency you earn by beating modes and times. TMU's peer-to-peer transfer system adds enormous value to the game.

As you can see, TrackMania United looks great. It's a very simple and clean aesthetic and it runs well on mid-range PCs. Nadeo has significantly improved areas of the graphics such as the lighting engine and the game looks outstanding in high resolutions with all details enabled. As in previous titles, there's no collision between vehicles, so even when racing online, it's ultimately you versus the track, versus time. This feels odd at first, until you remember the name of the game and what you're trying to beat. It's all about conquering the circuits.

"...and the track making editor now provides over 1000 blocks to tinker with."

As we go to press, Nadeo is still seeking a US publisher for TrackMania United, however they anticipate the game will be ready to go by early March.

Alienware Aurora m9700

Mike Griffin

Alienware's track record in the desktop market obviously speaks for itself, as the Florida-based company consistently destroys previous benchmark highs and incorporates ever more complex and powerful parts. Now they're upping the ante in the notebook sector and virtually no other enthusiast PC maker can touch their performance. Before your eyes is the Aurora m9700, a monster of a portable computer that we've had the pleasure of testing over the last two weeks. Say it with me: SLI enabled laptop gaming is here.

While the m9700 is certainly a large creature, it feels rugged and stable, it is well-weighted, and the device enjoys a superb configuration of inputs. Taking a clockwise tour of the system, we have two USB ports, 1394, Ethernet, SD and E-card readers flanking its left side, VGA, DVI, S-Video, Coaxial and S/PDIF on the rear, while the right side makes room for all things audio, including optical, center/surround/front outputs, and convenient mic and headphone 1/8" inputs with volume control. The front of the unit holds a dual layer DVD reader/burner. Opening the unit reveals its glorious 17-inch wide aspect LCD screen, capable of running at a native 1920 x 1200 resolution. Above the screen, Alienware has included a handy built-in 1.3 Megapixel camera with tilt. The screen is framed in glossy, sexy black, however much like the black PSP's front surface area you'll find this material is a magnet for prints, so watch those sticky fingers.

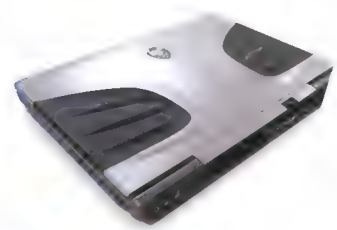
Aurora m9700	
	AMD Turion™ 64 Mobile Processors (800MHz FSB 1MB L2 Cache)
	512MB NVIDIA® GeForce™ Go 7900 GS - SLI Enabled
	Up to 2GB Dual Channel DDR SO-DIMM at 400MHz - 2 x 1024MB
	17"Widescreen with Clearview technology
	WideUXGA 1920 x 1200 LCD
	Up to 200GB SATA 4200 RPM (with support for 5400 RPM and 7200RPM)
	Up to 400GB (200GB X 2) 4200 SATA (with support for 5400 RPM and 7200 RPM)
	8X Dual Layer DVD+/-RW / 24X CD-RW Combo

"...a pair of GeForce 7900 GS video cards under the hood, each packing 256 MB."

With a pair of GeForce 7900 GS video cards under the hood, each packing 256 MB, the m9700 is immediately a little hungrier than its single GPU laptop brethren. This is where the AMD Turion 64 Mobile processor comes in, with its power saving features and low heat discharge. Rounding out the massive feature-set, our m9700 comes packed with 2 GB of system RAM and a 200-gig hard drive (expandable to 400 GB). How does this fine kit perform in games? We loaded up some demanding titles: MS Flight Simulator X, GTR 2, Gothic 3 and Battlefield 2142. FSX eats most computers alive, desktops included, yet the m9700 really managed well. It also played very well with GTR 2, even during heavy weather effects, and Gothic 3 rarely chugged at high resolutions. The real attraction here was Battlefield 2142 performance and the surreal hour we spent playing it over wi-fi in an airport (including strange looks when the G15 mouse came out). Obviously with dual graphics, plenty of RAM and a nice processor we were within range of BF 2142's recommended spec, but one simply does not expect a notebook to handle the game this well.

Alienware recommends the m9700 to hardcore gamers, video production companies and university engineering and science faculties. We agree on all counts. Like any high-end notebook, the m9700 will set you back a pretty penny when properly decked-out with elite components. Unlike other high-end notebooks, the m9700 is unbeatable when it comes to reproducing the strength of a powerful desktop PC.

score 9.0



REVIEW

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Publisher	Atlus	Available	Now (Japan) / Summer (U.S.)
Developer	Atlus	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	NA

Labyrinth of the World Tree

words **Casey Loe**

I spent most of my preteen years behind the keyboard of a Commodore 64, playing Might & Magic, Wizardry and "gold box" D&D games, and I have reams of graph-paper maps to prove it. The RPG's of that era were primitive and brutally difficult, but they pulled you in all the same, demanding your full attention with a never-ending series of challenging foes, complicated dungeons and wide-open character development systems. I miss those days, and apparently I'm not the only one. Trauma Center director Kazuya Niinou seems to be an equally big fan of late-80's PC dungeon crawls, since his newest game captures the essence of the genre perfectly. Etrian Odyssey is set entirely in a 30-level, 1st-person dungeon with the sharpest difficulty curve I've seen in years. This is the sort of game where you kick healthy characters out of your party to save a couple bucks on inn fees, and dead characters are left to rot when you can't afford to resurrect them. You won't need to bring the graph paper, though—Etrian Odyssey provides it for you on the lower screen of the DS. There you can draw a tile-by-tile map with the stylus and drag-and-drop icons to mark treasure chests and enemy ambushes. Map-making is strangely satisfying and strategically vital, as maps are the only thing you get to keep when your party is wiped out.

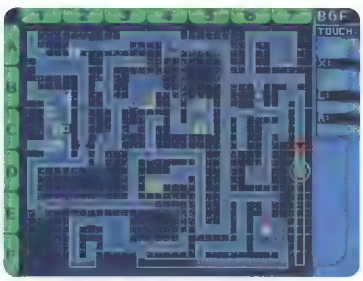
With its repetitive dungeon tiles and flat enemies, the graphics in Etrian Odyssey aren't going to win any awards. But the production values get a boost from Yuji Himukai's adorable character designs and an original soundtrack by Yuzo Koshiro of Ys, Streets of Rage, and Actraiser fame. Koshiro actually sampled the FM sound hardware of late 80's PCs, and the resultant soundtrack is much closer to his legendary compositions of the past than his experimental soundtracks of recent years.

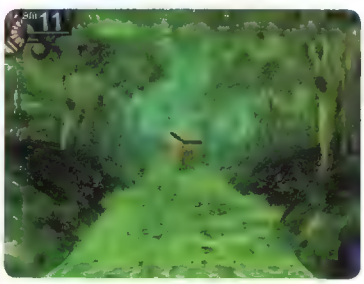
But Etrian Odyssey isn't about graphics and sound—it's about the labyrinth. The progressively stronger foes that populate each floor will force you to think very carefully about how you spend each gold piece, develop each character, and handle each enemy encounter. The game is equally tense outside of combat, where you'll have to track the movements of non-random "F.O.E." monsters that will decimate your party if you misjudge their patterns. Fortunately, a robust character development system provides plenty of interesting tools to keep your adventurer's guild in business. You can make up to 20 characters from nine esoteric classes, each carefully balanced to be ideal in certain situations and expendable in others.

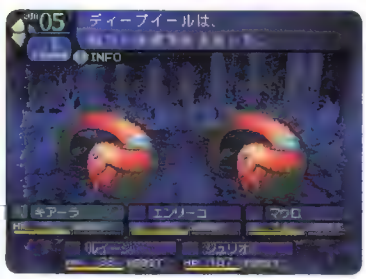
While Etrian Odyssey's edge-of-the-knife difficulty curve will delight hardcore RPG enthusiasts who are sick of the incessant hand-holding in most modern RPGs, it does backfire at times. For example, the game only lets you save in town, which forces you to either waste time trudging back and forth to the save spot or take risks that could end up costing you hours of playtime. But however many times Etrian Odyssey pisses me off, it always pulls me right back in. It isn't a game I would recommend to just anyone—if you haven't played the old-school franchises from which it draws its inspiration, I'm not sure you'll get what the developers were aiming for. But if you have fond memories of the graph-paper era of RPG's, Etrian Odyssey is an absolute must-buy.

Labyrinth of the World Tree **score 8.5**

"Trauma Center director Kazuya Niinou seems to be an equally big fan of late-80's PC dungeon crawls, since his newest game captures the essence of the genre perfectly."





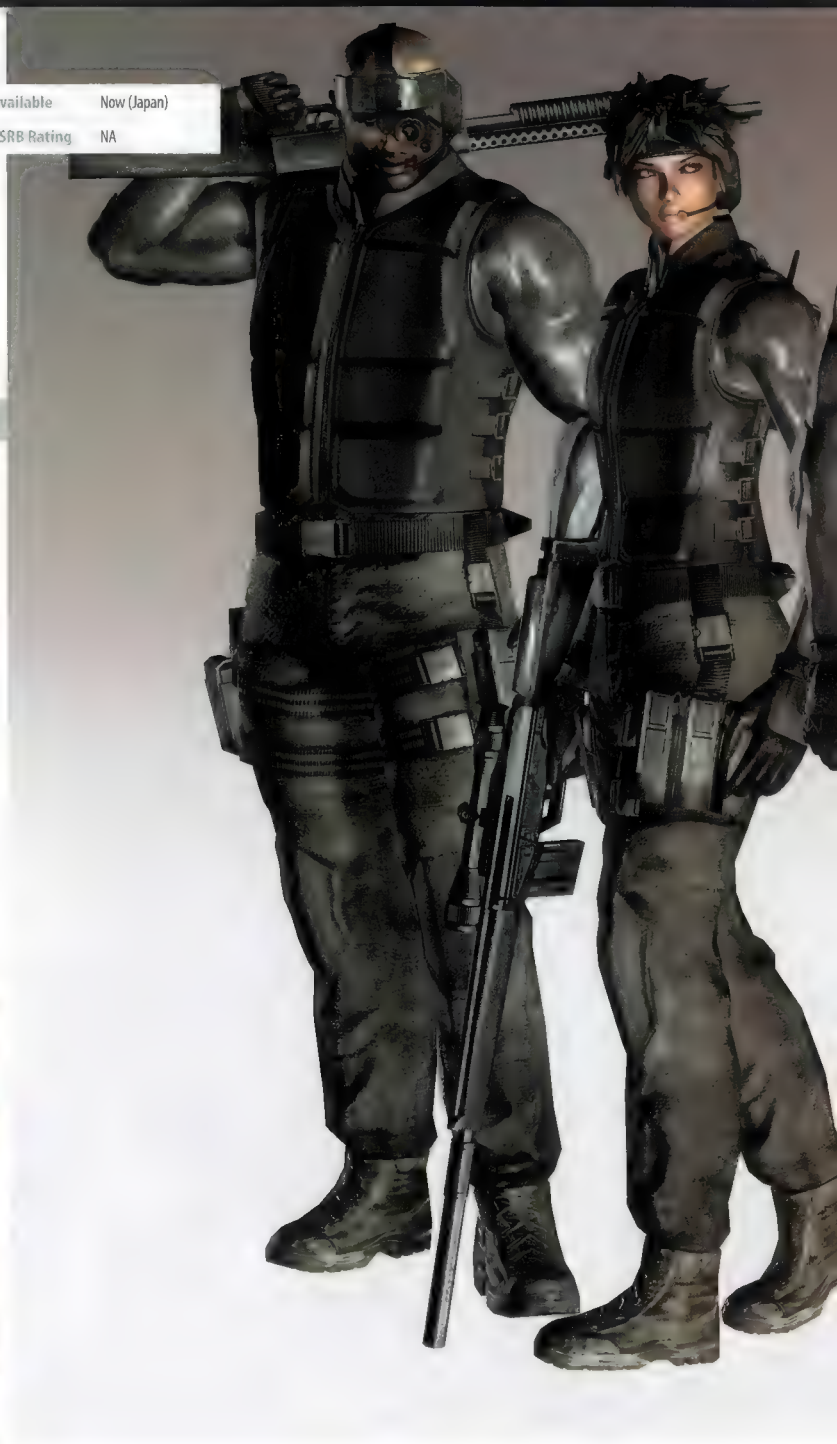


System(s)	Xbox 360	Publisher	AQ Interactive	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	Artoon	Online	8-player	ESRB Rating	NA

REVIEW

Vampire Rain

words **Nick Des Barres**



Japanese developers aping hit Western game styles is something I'm generally against, because it always ends in tragedy for all concerned. American gamers scoff at the hamfisted (yet undoubtedly earnest) nature of the gameplay crafted by developers only peripherally familiar with American culture, and the developers themselves are almost certainly left shaking their heads, wondering what could have possibly gone wrong with their meticulous market research. Into this sad milieu is thrust the latest iteration of the trend: Artoon and AQ Interactive's Vampire Rain.

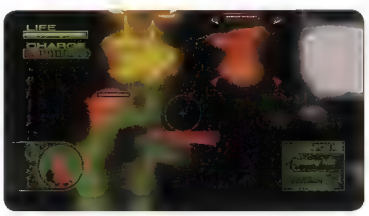
Guess what. It's great. However, Vampire Rain's quality has absoulutely nothing to do with an effective emulation of a Western genre, in this case Ubisoft's Splinter Cell series. What makes the game shine is its incredible naivete -- while playing it, one gets the impression the developers know American culture only through "youga", or Hollywood movies, and "youge", or Western games. It's this skewed view, like a distorted reflection through a funhouse mirror ot our own culture, that makes Vampire Rain so damn fascinating. Not since the post-Resident Evil 1 days in the late 90s when every Japanese adventure game needed an execrably-performed English voice track and a generic caucasian hero (Overblood, Deep Fear, Blue Stinger, etc.) has such a whacked-out title been foisted on the world.

Put simply, it's kitsch. Deep kitsch, made all the better for the fact that it takes itself dead seriously, despite ludicrously incongruous, over-the-top voiceovers and Engrish so bad it would make a first-year ESL student cringe. You play as covert operatives battling a vampire menace that's (inexplicably) broken out in "a city on the west coast of America" (obviously downtown Los Angeles, based on signs and textures lifted wholesale from the immediate area around the Los Angeles Convention Center). These deadly bloodsuckers' activities generally consist of hanging around on street corners, sporting "clubwear" copped directly from the Wesley Snipes series of Blade movies, smoking cigarettes and waiting for any unsuspecting human to stroll by so they can transform into super-freaky vicious nightmare dealers of death. If Vampire Rain has anything truly "cool" about it, it's the represenation of the enemy Nightwalkers. These dudes are scary, with snarling, mangled visages, rheumy eyes and spastic gaits reminiscent of something out of Jacob's Ladder...not to mention being able to run 50 miles per hour and leap several stories into the air. Oh, and they kill you instantly.

Which brings us to the gameplay. I could spend a paragraph detailing the intricacies of Vampire Rain's systems, or I could save time

"Put simply, [Vampire Rain] is kitsch. Deep kitsch, made all the better for the fact that it takes itself dead seriously..."

and simply tell you: "Its Splinter Cell." If Sam Fisher can do it, so can Vampire Rain hero John Lloyd, albeit at a much faster pace. Even the button layout and character animations are virtually identical, though where Fisher is methodical and plodding, Lloyd is rapid and moment-to-moment. The major difference other than pacing is what transpires should you happen to be spotted by an enemy. In Splinter Cell (and Metal Gear Solid, for that matter), you have any number of choices to eliminate the threat and resume covert operations. In Vampire Rain...well, you die. The enemies are so absurdly powerful that they're able to track you down and rip out your throat in seconds, no matter from how far away you get detected. Like I say, these bastards are fast, easily earning my vote for most fearsome, most singularly mighty standard enemies in video game history. This is entirely by design, of course, and the story makes it quite clear that human beings are absolutely no match for Nightwalkers. Fortunately, you have a tool attached to your (again, Sam Fisher-esque) scope that allows you to invoke "Necrovision", a mode that scans surrounding lifeforms, determining whether or not they are Nightwalkers, or as-yet-uninfected humans. Confirmed Nightwalkers appear on your radar, allowing them to be more easily avoided. For



the first chunk of the (surprisngly long) single-player campaign, you absolutely cannot get spotted: It's stealth on a level far exceeding that of Splinter Cell or MGS. Later on a bevy of groovy ultraviolet light-based anti-Nightwalker weapons do become available, and the game makes quite a refreshing about-face to out-and-out TPS action. After the initial thrill of being given tools to effectively combat the horrific Nightwalkers, certain missions will simply not provide you with any advanced weaponry at all, forcing you to rely once again on sneaking tactics. The balance is well-done and contributes an added sense of variety to an already highly polished game.

The Japanese know how to make games -- it's that simple. In this regard, Vampire Rain delivers. We are talking about a development team chock-a-block with ex-Sega employees, after all, and the game's director is none other than "feather of Sonic" Naoto Ohshima (talk about turning over a new leaf!). While Vampire Rain's aesthetic, story and worldview fall into the "so bad they're good" category, the visuals are regrettably not on par with the average Western 360 game. This isn't to say they're bad by any means, as the areas are vast, faithful recreations of downtown LA, often acres larger than those in any Splinter Cell. The character models are legitimately cool and animation superb. In particular, the enemy Nightwalker motions are downright terrifying -- you haven't seen fleshy undulations this spasmodically disturbing since the final sequences of Seijun Suzuki's Pistol Opera. However, environments, as beautifully textured as they are, are all right angles and no bump mapping or other fancy shader shenanigans are apparent at all. The one truly impressive graphical effect is the everpresent, pouring rain, which patters on every surface, causing ripples in pools, hazy reflections on rain-slicked streets, dripping with astonishing realism off of every surface from metal, to skin, to rubber. We're not just talking animated textures here -- the surfaces beneath each raindrop refract and distort just as they should. If Gears of War hadn't beat it to the punch, Vampire Rain would without question be the most realistic video game representation of the weather phenomenon ever.

The prevailaing opinion here in Japan is that Vampire Rain's best feature is its online mode, and though I might not agree, it is pretty darn neat. Supporting up to eight players, it features the standard deathmatches and capture-the-flags...with one critical twist. You can play as the fearsome Nightwalkers that menaced you so in the one-player campaign, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound and take far more damage. Does that make it impossible for human players to win? Not at all -- only humans can use firearms, forcing vampires to get in close. There's not enough room here to elaborate, but this conceit makes for a very compelling online experience.

Vampire Rain may not be the best game in the world. Titles like Gears of War and Lost Planet, are, frankly, much better. But there's something inherently charming about Artoon's massively misconceived notions about America and what American gamers like to play, and it's for that reason -- kitsch value -- I rate it as high as I do. An American release for the game seems unlikely, but thankfully all the in-game text can be changed to English via the option screen. If you happen to be pining for a return to those post-Resident Evil 1 halcyon days of Engrish galore, Vampire Rain awaits.

Vampire Rain

score 7.5

REVIEW

System(s)	PlayStation 2	Publisher	Square Enix	Available	Now (Japan)
Developer	Square	Online/Multi	NA	ESRB Rating	NA

Seiken Densetsu 4

The Mana series dies

How could these lovely graphics have gone to such waste?

words **Nick Des Barres**

I cannot think of any major video game franchise, save perhaps those that were run into the ground by endless, yearly sequels in the vein of Tomb Raider, that has suffered the way the Secret of Mana/Seiken Densetsu series has. The original GameBoy game (released in America as Final Fantasy Adventure) remains the best action RPG on that system...and then there was Secret of Mana. Try to find a single RPG aficionado over the age of 20 who doesn't have a special place in their heart for that particular game and I'll give you a quarter. The Japan-only Seiken Densetsu 3 was more of a good thing, but since then the series has had nothing but crappy spinoffs with very few redeeming features, most recently on Nintendo DS with Children of Mana.

Imagine, then, series fans' rejoicing when it was announced the original creator of the series, Koichi Ishii, was returning to helm the first numbered entry in the franchise in eleven (!) years. Early screenshots revealed lush, beautiful environments, gorgeous pastel wonderlands full of perfect polygonal representations (this is the first 3-D entry in the series, don't forget) of series mascots like Rabbies and Myconids. Oscar-winning composer Ryuichi Sakamoto was announced as penning the main theme. Masato Kato, of Chrono Trigger/Chrono Cross fame, was responsible for the story. What could possibly go wrong?

Everything. Yes, friends, Seiken Densetsu 4 is the nadir of the series...and very possibly the worst major game Square Enix has ever released. I honestly don't even know where to begin. What makes a Mana game? If you asked me, I'd say it was a continuous, Zelda-like action RPG world, with towns, money, equippable items -- all the usual trappings. Computer-controlled partner characters also play a vital role in the formula. What if I told you Seiken Densetsu 4 was a stage-clear type action/platform game...and a pretty awful one at that? What if I told you nothing you gained in any level carried over to the next, including experience points? What if I told you every stage consisted of simply running around pushing background objects (referred to in the game as "MONO", Japanese for "things") into enemies, startling them and making them easier to defeat...a system with seemingly no purpose except to show off Square's implementation of the Havok physics engine on PlayStation 2? And that you did it completely solo?

"Yes, friends, Seiken Densetsu 4 is the nadir of the series."

Look, I could accept a massive revamp of the Seiken formula. I might even have been able to stomach its transformation into an action/platform game...had it been any good. Control is clunky, gameplay snore-inducing, and levels so ridiculously (and pointlessly) large they do nothing but frustrate. On almost every level, Seiken Densetsu 4 is a failure...and this fact is only magnified by its once-great legacy. To be fair, however, there are two great things about the game, which only make the total package that much more pitiable.

These are the graphics and sound (how very Square!). Seiken 4 is gorgeous. Looking like an even more beautiful Kingdom Hearts, the environments are impeccably art-designed, bursting with color and impressive effects. The realtime cutscenes are especially nice, showing off the intricate character models and Square's now-trademark perfect lipsync technology. Similarly, the achingly lovely soundtrack by Kenji Ito of Sa-Ga series fame and Tsuyoshi Sekito from Brave Fencer Musashi can, at times, almost convince you you're playing a good game. For me, this is the real tragedy of the Seiken 4: Square's creative staff is operating at a level so far beyond that of most other third parties, that it makes the fact the game itself sucks seem that much worse.

I weep for Seiken Densetsu. I weep for all the incredibly talented artists that worked on the game, and most of all, I weep for Square Enix itself. The universal bad vibes this game is getting in Japan and abroad almost certainly mean the Seiken/Mana series is dead. Square Enix may remain my favorite third-party, but this and other recent games like Dirge of Cerberus indicate strongly that it's time to, like, hire people who can make action games. Here's hoping Heroes of Mana, the final entry in the "World of Mana" series revival (by Brownie Brown, the original team responsible for Seiken 2 and 3) will act a fitting apertif to wash away the noxious taste of Seiken Densetsu 4.

score **5.0**

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Air Gear

Jet Set Radio Anime

words Bill Corey

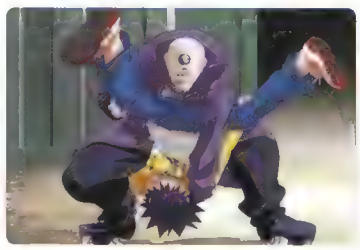
Publisher	ADV Films	Running Time	144 Minutes
Rating	TV-MA	Available	Now

No genre does the whole "unknown rises to the top of his sport" genre better than anime. Keep your *Rocky*s and your *Karate Kid*s—I'll stick with titles like *Air Gear*, from ADV Films, to get my "underdog story" fix, thank you very much. Where else can you find such an appealing mix of action, beautiful women, and the coolest accessory this side of a hover board?

Junior high school student Ikki Minami, all-around tough guy, has a problem: he was beaten to within an inch of his life by a gang known as the Skull Saders. Using Air Trecks (ATs), rollerblades with only two wheels that allow users to skate like the Flash and jump like the Hulk, the Saders easily dispatch Ikki. Defeated, he returns home to the Noyamanos sisters, orphans like him, where he discovers that there's more to the four young women than he ever imagined—they're actually accomplished AT grinders themselves. Thus begins Ikki's journey into the secret world of "Storm Riders," an underground league of AT skaters competing to become the king of the sky.

From its hip-hop urban soundtrack, to its slick CGI and razor-clean animation, everything about *Air Gear* screams "high production values." The anime equivalent of the X-Games, *Gear* uncouples its heroes from gravity itself, taking you on a high-flying ride through an urban jungle. Though stumbling from time to time, particularly in scenes where CGI appears alongside traditional hand-drawn animation, *Gear* remains an enjoyable trip for extreme sports enthusiasts and anime fans alike.

"...Air Gear remains an enjoyable trip for extreme sports enthusiasts and anime fans alike."



Air Gear

score 8.5

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.hack//roots

Break on through

Keeping up with the multiple realities and storylines of the .hack universe is as daunting as taking up an actual MMO game. .hack//roots is the prequel to the games series .hack//G.U., much like //SIGN was a prequel to the //Games. Confused? You should be. Bandai has created a juggernaut of a franchise with the dot hack world, and it only gets more insular as it goes along.

At its core, .hack is about MMORPGs. .hack//roots tells the story of Haseo, a new player in the updated version 2 of "The World," an MMO eveloped in the future. As with any protagonist in the .hack world, Haseo is the target of multiple guilds who believe he is the wielder of an unusual power.

Pai looks much better from the front.

"Bandai has created a juggernaut of a franchise..."

Haseo teams up with The Twilight Brigade to hunt down The Key of the Twilight, a mysterious in-game item that may have an effect on real-life events. .hack fans will recall this isn't the first series to be concerned with the enigmatic Key. Perhaps it is due to the return of the entire creative team from .hack//SIGN that the item appears again here.

This is not the place to start if you want to be involved in the .hack universe. A full understanding of the events of //roots is only possible by full immersion into the .hack franchise. Thankfully, its rewarding science fiction, if you're willing to invest a few hundred hours. **Heather Campbell**

score 8.0

\+ A welcome reboot of the .hack universe.

\- Still way too involved for newcomers.

Tokko

Let's go chopping

As one of the few survivors of a spree-killing that left hundreds in his apartment building literally hacked to pieces, it's certainly not unusual that Ranmaru Shindo suffers from intense nightmares where he is repeatedly saved by an intense young woman wielding a broadsword. What is unusual is that these dreams are starting to come to pass, especially when Ranmaru meets Sakura, who seems to be the selfsame savior of his nightmares. *Tokko*, Manga Entertainment's anime adaptation of the manga of the same name, depicts a world that seems slightly off-kilter and slowly spirals downward into a dark vision of demons, devils, and assorted beasties.

Tokko takes its name from a special division of the police force, the mysterious "Section 2." Shrouded in secrecy, officers in the Tokko division don't use guns—rather, they do their bloody work using swords, knives and daggers, leaving corpses hacked to pieces and the mess for rank-and-file officers, like Inspector Ranmaru, to clean up. It's a curious convention that, in anime, swords are at least as powerful as guns, and in *Tokko* even more so—the demons that infest human beings can only be destroyed with blades. As Ranmaru struggles to uncover the mystery of his dreams, which seem to be linked to his parents' death, we see this truism repeated time and again.

The show starts out promising, but takes several unfortunate detours from

"...depicts a world that seems slightly off-kilter"

the overarching story, notably scenes between Ranmaru and his younger sister, Saya, who seems obsessed with getting him a date and loves waking him up in the morning wearing only her underwear. These comedic notes, designed to lighten the story no doubt, only distract from it. A similar sub-plot involving Kunikida's (Ranmaru's boss) heavy-handed attempts to deal with the demons on his own also feels tacked-on, though it's funnier than the scenes involving Saya.

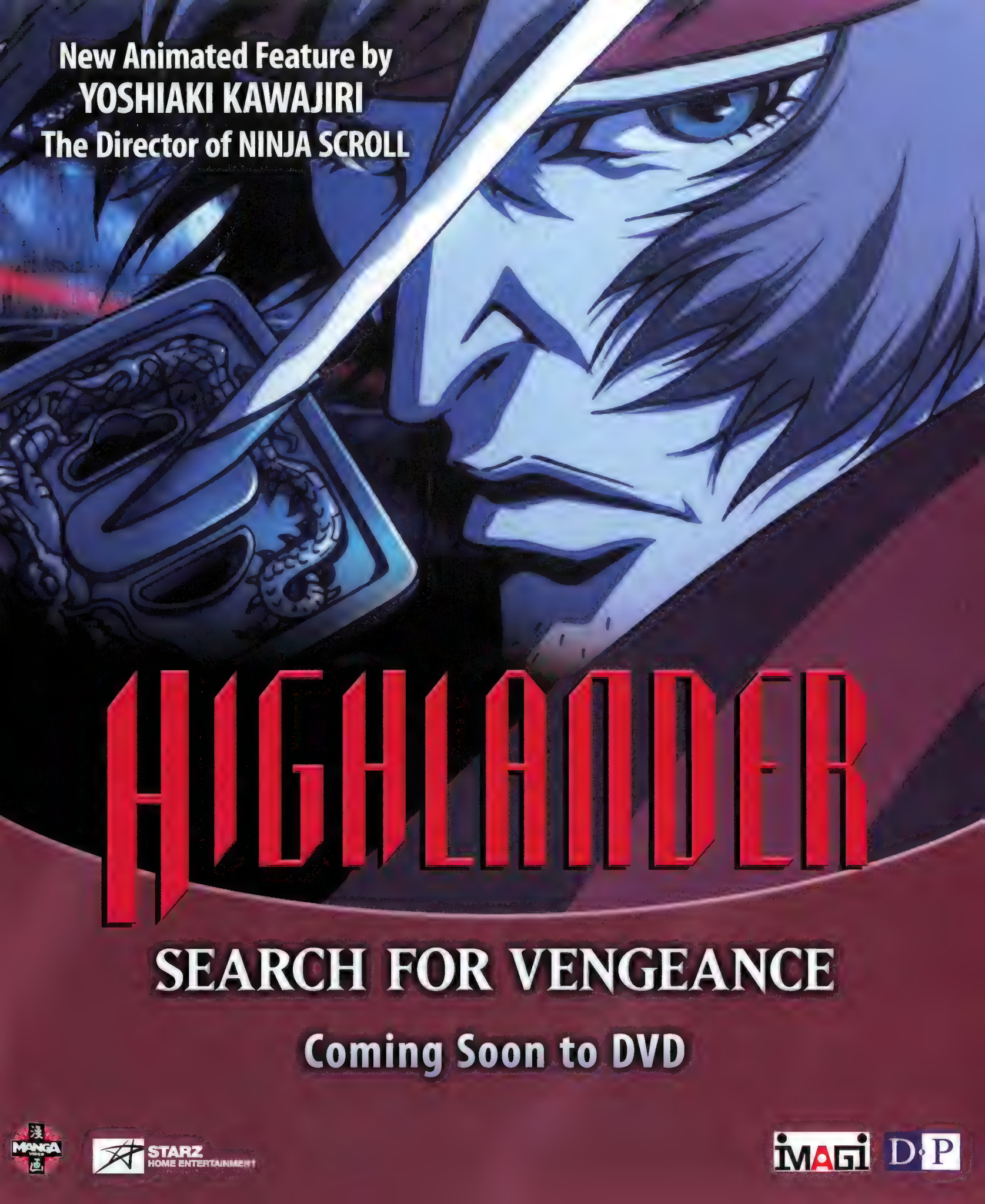
Other problems with *Tokko* have nothing to do with the plot. I found the animation, in particular, to be extremely flat, dull, and conventional, with characters seeming to move stiffly, even in the sword fighting scenes. Couple that with a below-average English dub, and you've got a series that feels like it fell short of its full potential. Oh, and if you're not used to the "hyper" violence of some anime (particularly anime horror), you'll probably be put off by the egregious shower of body parts and blood in many scenes. I certainly was at times, and I watch anime for a living.

A curious mix of police procedural, brother-sister comedy, survival horror, and the paranormal, *Tokko* tries hard to present a compelling vision of demons overrunning Tokyo. Its stilted animation, ho-hum dubbing, and conventional story, however, ultimately prevent this vision from coming to pass. **Bill Gray**

score 7.0

\+ Seeing Sakura and Ranmaru interact while carving up more demons than you can shake a sword at.

\- Seeing all of the pieces of those demons come flying apart in veritable showers of blood.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Released by	ADV Films	Running Time	125 Minutes
Rating	PG	Available	Now

Utawarerumono

Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious?

words **Bill Gray**

"...atmosphere is certainly something Utaware has in spades"

I'll avoid the lazy writer's obvious play the name, and simply state what may not be immediately obvious: *Utawarerumono* is one of the finest fantasy anime to come along in a long time. Not since *Record of Lodoss War* or *Escaflowne* has medieval/epic fantasy been done this well, and fans of the genre should either snap up the first volume of this promising series immediately or turn in their oversized elf ears for good.

Based on a Japanese-only video game first released in 2002, the world of *Utawarerumono* revolves around a man who wakes up in the middle of a forest, grievously wounded with no memories, no idea of how he arrived in the forest, and no clue why he has a "phantom of the opera"-type mask stuck to top half of his face. Found and nursed by to health by Eluuu, the village chief's granddaughter, Hakuoro (as he is eventually named) proves to be a capable and decisive leader, and no slouch in combat either.

Though haunted by visions of gnashing teeth, fire and blood, Hakuoro reluctantly accepts the mantle of leadership when the surrounding countryside erupts in a conflagration of violence and armed rebellion. Hakuoro's character holds *Utaware* together, literally and figuratively, and fortunately for the series, he represents a rarity among anime characters these days—a father figure who exudes confidence, strength, and a curious gentleness all at the same time. Don't get me wrong—he's no Atticus Finch—but when you add in his mysterious past, and the fact that wields a metal fan as a weapon (and makes it look downright sweet!), you get an intriguing character to build a series around.

Set in a fantasy facsimile of Japan's Sengoku period, *Utaware* looks wonderful. The animators used a softer, almost pastel color palette, with the villagers dressed in pseudo-Ainu attire. I found it odd, however, that nearly everyone in the show, Hakuoro (I think) excluded, sported a pair of over-large, fuzzy dog-ears, and many of the women had bushy tails as well. *Utaware* deigns to explain why this is so, but the "furry" touch certainly doesn't lessen the series' visual appeal—indeed, it actually adds to the overall fantasy atmosphere.

And atmosphere is certainly something *Utaware* has in spades. Instead of trying to follow a set formula for every episode (a trend in all TV animation, not just anime), the show unfolds at its own pace, taking its time in revealing new characters and in exposing new facets of characters you think you know, particularly Hakuoro. Combine this with beautifully fluid animation, stirring battle scenes, an excellent soundtrack, a well-done English dub (though the Japanese is even better), and plentiful extras and you get a must-have for any fan of the fantasy genre.

It's good to be a mythological beast.

Utawarerumono — score 9.5

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Released by	FUNimation Productions	Running Time	125 minutes
Rating	TV 14	Available	Now

Rumbling Hearts

Girls gone mild

words

Diving into the melodrama of Rumbling Hearts is a lot like tuning in for a soap opera (or J-drama, if you're too *emo* to be caught watching CBS). Based on the popular relationship simulator released for the Dreamcast and the PS2 in Japan, Rumbling Hearts -- also known as Kimi ga Nozomu Eien -- has all the trappings of the Anime Romance genre. There are broad characters, sappy music, inconsistent animation, and lots of different types of girls. And girls getting drunk. And girls confessing their messy feelings through a waterfall of tears.

Regardless, I'll be getting the final disc. The show is addictive. Not good addictive, mind you. Bad addictive. Like instant ramen, Dan Brown "novels" or episodes of Survivor.

Rumbling Hearts tells the story of Haruka Suzumiya, Takayuki Narumi, Mitsuki Hayase and Shinji Taira. First set in High School, we meet Haruka as a sweet, naïve girl who really wants to date Narumi. When she finally confesses her feelings, they begin to have the type of love affair only found in fiction: unconditional, sugary, and supportive. Best friends Hayase and Taira happily encourage the pair through their first few dates, despite the obviousness of Hayase's unrequited affections for our hero.

Hayase gets her chance, however, when Haruka gets involved in a terrific car accident and spends the next three years in a coma. Throwing herself at Narumi, the two are soon living together, even though the poor guy seems to live in a world populated only by fetishes: waitresses, nurses, angry bosses, little sisters, and ditzy sidekicks.

When Haruka awakens, the doctor suggests that all concerned behave as if no time has past. Narumi's love blossoms like a tulip brought back into the sun, and all of the people around him crumble into heaps of overexerted nerves.

The characters aren't deep, or compelling ... but the patient reveals of the plot propel the story forward like a pulp novel. Like a book bought at an airport, you'll follow it to its conclusion, despite the embarrassment you feel carrying it off the plane. Sometimes, the world just needs a little sap.

Rumbling Hearts

score 7.5

\+ A soapy story with enough masochistic drama to keep you riveted

\- This is what life looks like when you're stuck inside

"Like a book bought at an airport you'll follow it to its conclusion..."

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Archlord

Knights in red satin

Publisher	Tokyopop	Genre	Action/Fantasy	Volume	1
Story	Jin-Hwan Park	Art	Jin-Hwan Park	Rating	13+

It's hard to believe that the Archlord manga is based on a PC MMO (it's much too good) although in this case the game does share a parallel with the manga in that one can actually rule in the game. Lusting for dominion in the manga, we find of course, a human, Ernan, who betrays his lord; mightiest knight in all of Durnan and wielder of Brunhard (one sword to rule them all) and calls for the head of his infant son Zian. But just as his minions are about to slay the child they meet their end.

Before he succumbed to his fate the brave knight sheathed Brunhard, and so even though Ernan now holds the blade he can not wield it and rule as he so desires. We join Zian 17 years later, now a young man of the forest, at peace with its dwellers…well, all but the goblins. Meanwhile Ernan draws near on his quest to break the seal. Archlord is a gorgeous book that flows so well it practically reads itself. I need more STAT.

Read it if... you like a good bloodletting

"It's hard to believe that the Archlord manga is based on a PC MMO (it's much too good)..."

He will have his revenge!

Junk: Record of the Last Hero

Great power, no responsibility

Publisher	DrMaster	Genre	Sci-Fi	Volume	1
Story	Kia Asamiya	Art	Kia Asamiya	Rating	15+

Gritty, raw, and powerful, Kia Asamiya's manga *Junk* illustrates another, darker side of the superhero genre. *Junk* describes what 99 percent of us would do if suddenly given the powers of, say, Superman, or some similarly spandex-clad hero or heroine. Admit it—you wouldn't use your powers to save the world—at least, not right away. Nope, first on the agenda would be taking care of Number One, employing your newfound abilities for personal gain, enjoyment, and maybe, just maybe, a little payback as well.

At least, that's what damaged high school student Hiro Yuuki chooses to do with it. Confined to his room because of bullying at school, Hiro enters an online contest on a whim and wins the opportunity to test a new product from Junk Systems—a device that looks like a Power Ranger suit crossbred with Guyver armor. The super suit enables Hiro to pay back his tormentors with interest, but Hiro inadvertently uses it to demolish his own home. He ends up killing his parents and everyone else in the building, until he's stopped by someone wearing another set of Junk armor, complicating matters even further.

In all of his manga, Asamiya showcases a finely-honed talent for bringing to life characters that bleed and die and wrestle with moral and ethical ambiguity. In *Junk*, there is no "black" or "white," no "good guy" or "bad guy." Rather, the author has created something far deeper and more complex—he has shed a little light on the darkness that inhabits us all.

Read it if... you've ever wondered if you could resist using x-ray vision for more, shall we say, licentious purposes.

"...a Power Ranger suit crossbred with Guyver armor."

Dressed to kill...

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My Dead Girlfriend

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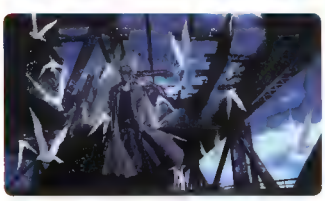


Highlander

Publisher: Manga Ent. / Starz Home Ent. / Imagi
Director: Yoshiaki Kawajiri **Available:** June

Yes it's true, the director who brought us Ninja Scroll and Vampire D Bloodlust, together with Madhouse, has revisioned Highlander in this stunning DVD movie. The minute it gets underway, you can see it—that unmistakable and infectious Kawajiri style…It's absolutely gorgeous. We'll have much more, very soon.

covet these

TokyoPop Art Books

Bizenghast and Princess Al

Publisher: | Price: | Rating:

At if TokyoPop could get any cooler they've now taken the proverbial cake with their newly remodeled art book line. Not your average art books mind you, these are manga sized and loaded that house rad uses, removable art pin-ups and sticker sheets. The ultimate companion for your favorite TokyoPop manga they better get busy on I Luv Halloween, Et Cetera, Drive Villa, Midnight Opera, Hyper Police, Vampire Revenge, MBQ… Guess it's just would be a lot

Saw III

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

It's about time for the creators of *Saw* to say enough is enough, but that's not to say *Saw III* doesn't offer up some gruesome kicks. As the budgets increase along with the success of this marginally clever horror series, the sequels have traded in suspenseful surprise for increasing shock value. There's only so much left riding on the film's original premise of a serial killer teaching his victims lessons in their pathetic lives, and the eventual numbing of repetition is *Saw III*'s biggest downfall.

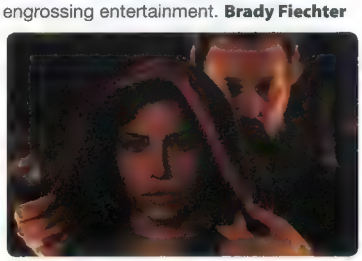
The movie returns to the plight of Jigsaw, who's set up another killing game as he lies in his death bed in a filthy warehouse, while one of his potential victims is forced to apply medical attention. Meanwhile, the game is on: a father of a son killed by a drunk driver navigates a brutal maze of various death traps, which hold potential victims who were all involved in some way or another with the sequence of events leading up to the son's accident. The father decides who lives or dies, battling with this ambiguous tale of horror and personal forgiveness. *Saw III*'s attempt to bring added depth of thought to its senseless center of brutality kind of works. When it doesn't, at least there's enough entertaining traps—you have to like the pig-grinding scene where a judge is drowning in the remains—to keep your thirst for gore quenched. **Brady Fiechter**

The Illusionist

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

The great Eisenheim is a dazzler of audiences, exciting the imagination with the awe of his magic. His tricks become so extraordinary, it would seem he is in touch with the supernatural, as he begins to call spirits back from the dead. He is such an expert magician that his skills start to become threatening to the paranoid, and as his reputation grows, so do political threats from the powers that be. A murder entangles Eisenheim in severe consequences, and so begins the most intriguing moments of *The Illusionist* and its compelling mysteries.

The movie takes place in turn-of-the-century Vienna, its rich setting beautifully staged and integral to the effectual mood of the story. We are quickly caught up in this world of magic and romanticism, but as the battle of will and conscience wages between Eisenheim and the inspector Uhl, the Illusionist finally weave its hanging strands into engrossing entertainment. **Brady Fiechter**



Stan Lee Presents Mosaic

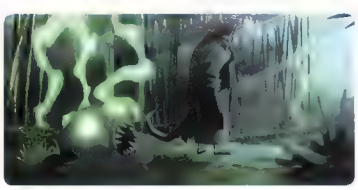
Extras:

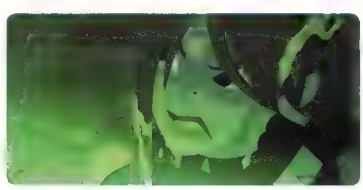
Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

I respect Stan Lee as much as the next guy, which is why I can't understand why he appears before *Mosaic* to exclaim its virtues as though he's discovered the formula for teenage super heroines. Maggie Nelson is anything but. She's a shape shifter, but there have been many before her, and the ancient race in peril card has been played out and then some more. More so than the story however, what really drags Mosaic down is the character design and Scooby-Doo animation. The whole thing is just so worn that it may as well come with an "as-is" agreement. There are few moments to relish overall and what there are quickly washed away from scene to nauseating scene. Hard to believe it's from Film Roman, but I suppose every studio is prone to a dud now and again. Then again, this does reek of those old super-hero cartoons of yesteryear (simplistic and oh-so ugly) so it may be par for the old-school comic book course. Thankfully, I wouldn't know. I think it's time to introduce Stan to some anime studios. **Dave Halverson**

Hellboy Sword of Storms

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:



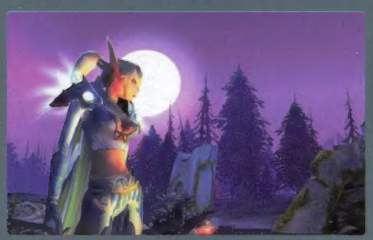


He may have been brought into this world to create hell on earth but all Hellboy wants is a 2-hour shower and a sauna, a request that's interrupted when a pair of ancient demon brothers sealed within a sword decide it's time to party hearty in the modern world after diving from their scroll into the body of a hapless professor. Arriving on the scene, Hellboy unwittingly picks up the sword and thusly becomes its owner. Transported to the spirit realm he must do battle with the demons' evocations, as they work through the possessed professor to either get the sword or make Hellboy break it…his only way home, and their only ticket into the human realm. The story behind the sword is the key to the puzzle, but that's better left to the viewer. *Sword of the Storms*, the first of 3 animated Hellboy movies, is a wonderful piece of work. All of the film's core actors make the scene and appear in the extensive extras (a rarity for animation) along with Mignola and Del Toro. The animation is average in places but spectacular where it counts, the dialogue rich and generously spattered with Hellboy's trademark dry humor, and the character design—an interesting take on Mike M's comic book style—is well suited to the task. The mystical Japanese bend doesn't hurt either. **Dave Halverson**

02_07 MIKE GRIFFIN
PC EDITOR

The Burning Kool-Aid Over 8 million served

For a PC gamer, especially one who critiques, the whole process of investigating online role-playing games can be backbreaking if you're not careful. There are 8.1 million humans out there that will confirm how time consuming just *one* MMO game is. The big mainstreamers making headlines of late are The Burning Crusade (that'd be the World of Warcraft



Burning Crusade

expansion, in case you've just surfaced), Brad McQuaid's Vanguard, and Lord of the Rings Online—the latter still in the midst of its beta phase at Turbine. All three games are generally solid efforts crafted by large teams with plenty of production years behind them. This is good, because a shoddy game in this genre is the birthplace of endless nightmares for a player. You see, unlike a single-player experience, the MMO is a form of campaign game design that is largely defined by one parameter: it is built with no real ending. Without the ultimate finalizing completeness of a contained campaign game. The story that begins for your character when he or she enters the persistent universe doesn't try to run a course towards absolute conclusion. It's sort of like watching a never-ending movie of your character's existence, riding an endless series of mini-denouements, always evading a full resolution. This concept can be pretty intimidating, addicting, or insane, depending on one's angle of entry.

People have expectations for MMOs that usually far exceed what current technology is capable of delivering, often romanticizing the freedom and scope of the game world. A small minority even go to great lengths to roleplay their character. Many enjoy the statistical RPG element and being surrounded by other real players as they develop their character. And because of its unique nature and WoW's rise to industry phenom, the genre tends to incite some interesting discussion. Vanguard's recent final stretch to retail sparked great debate in Sigil's forums, almost exclusively between new generation World of Warcraft players and old school MMO'ers (grizzled vets of Ultima, EQ, Camelot, etcetera). Typically it would boil down to players rationalizing the inherent non-finality of design in this genre, and how one's virtual eternity should be filled-up. Attaining the game's maximum character level is enough for some people to feel an "I beat the game" sort of feeling, and perhaps rightfully so. After all, levels have been a recurring RPG progress metric since the first Dungeons & Dragons module rolled off the production line. In a massively multiplayer online role-playing game, the level cap is like a brick wall with a big spray-painted neon green message that reads: "Your character can't get much stronger than this." But there's a little row of fine print scrawled beneath that message, something to the effect of, "And until the expansion pack raises the cap, we'll have you chasing infinitesimally small stat upgrades like a heroine addict pursues a fix."

History demonstrates that many gamers are content to frolic behind the aforementioned brick wall for years at a time, revisiting the same environments and replaying the same narrative in the interest of slowly accumulated numerical superiority. How soon a player can reach max level and what to do once they're there is an area where the community fragments. People that slingshot to level cap to raid the same dungeons with their guild week in and week out know the drill. They know all about that evasive, dangling carrot. Some online RPG players live for it with an almost masochistic vigor; others simply don't have the lifestyle to allow it. I will happily admit to enjoying a good RPG stat grind if the execution is working in all the right areas, but similar to the latter party, I don't have time to live in the penthouse these days. For us, the pacing that leads up to that top level grind becomes *the* hot topic. Meanwhile, somewhere on Earth, there's a poor MMO designer going out of his mind trying to find cool ways to delay the consumption of content in his world. A world that is always on, proceeding whether one's character is there or not.

I was recently emboldened by a chat with Warhammer Online producer Jeff Hickman. Here's this guy building a huge third-generation online game, Daddy EA-Bucks watching over his shoulder, 150 team members under his command, and he still manages to level cap a character in every big MMO that comes out. Yet he stays focused (and married). Jeff is proof that you don't need to over-eat to enjoy the full flavor. I'll cap my characters too, but I'm really just looking for personality in all the persistence. MMOs are at their best when they motivate players to learn and explore, not just rinse and repeat.

> "The simple fact is no one knows for sure what's going to hit and what's going to miss."

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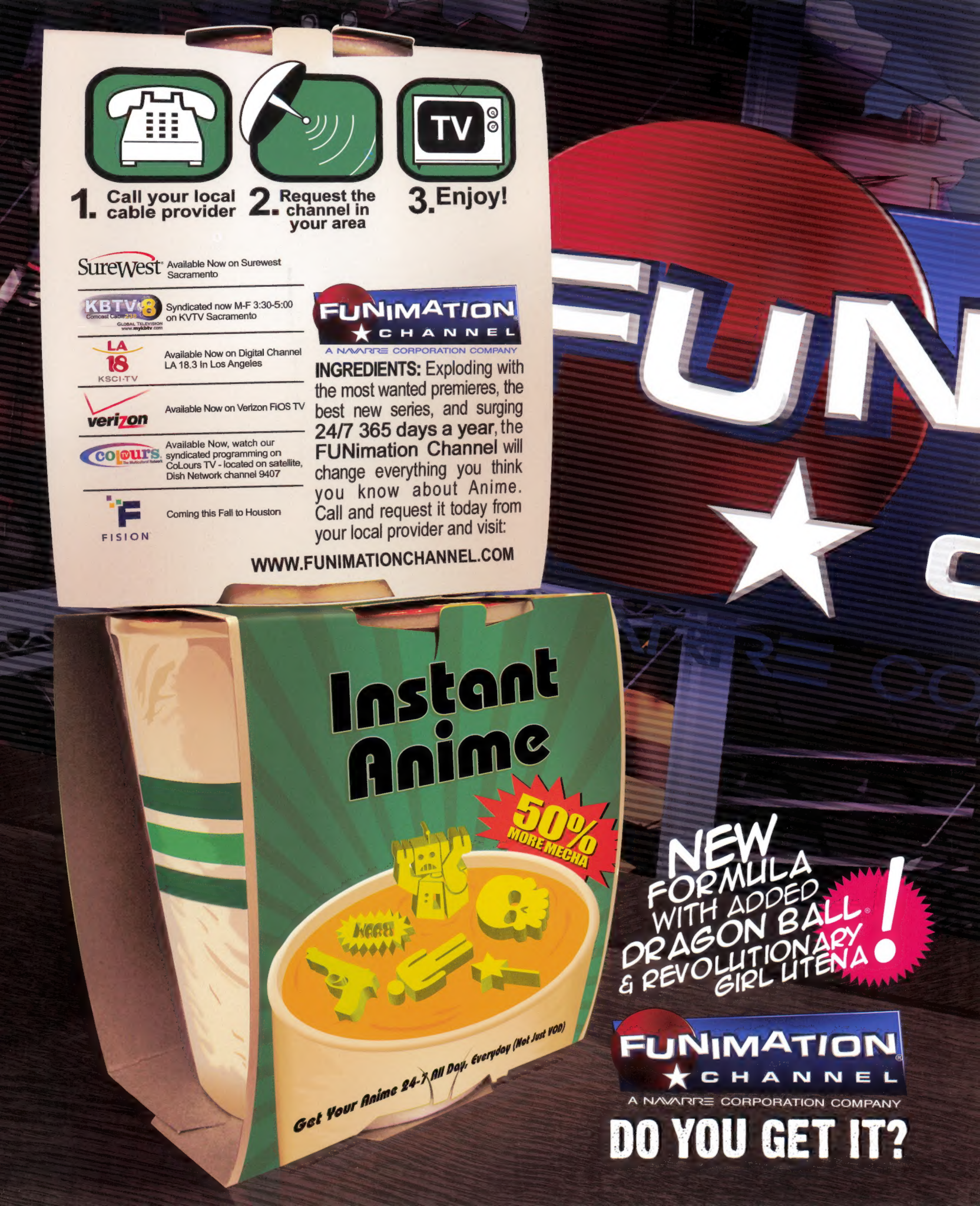
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